

**The communicative effectiveness of section 3.3 of the  
Benefits Policy (DV0406) of Stellenbosch University (SU)  
after rewriting it into plain language and according to  
document design principles**

by  
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*Thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at  
Stellenbosch University*



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March 2020

## **Declaration**

By submitting this thesis electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the sole author thereof (save to the extent explicitly otherwise stated), that reproduction and publication thereof by Stellenbosch University will not infringe any third party rights and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

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## ABSTRACT

All documents, including policy documents, should be as clear, understandable and transparent as possible. It should enable any individual of average literacy, including the academic staff (C1), administrative/support staff (C2) and technical staff (C3) of Stellenbosch University (SU) to understand text when reading it for the first time, regardless of educational level.

A text is written in plain language when its readers are able to discover, understand and apply the intended information after only reading the text once. Hence Kimble's (1996-1997) notion that plain language is not a form of "baby talk" or "dumbing down" the language – it is simply a form of comprehensible and useful communication that could enhance the reading and comprehension of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3.

During in-depth individual interviews this study investigated precisely why readers do not perceive and understand Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 clearly. Furthermore, it explored the results of writing policy documents in plain language whilst adapting it according to the principles of document design.

The focus group discussions was the test phase of this study and an investigation was conducted to determine whether and to what extent plain language techniques rendered the redesigned document more transparent and comprehensible.

In addition, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was employed to investigate the dialogue used in Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3. It examined the communicative methods used by those in power. It was engaged to examine the use of language that attempts to disguise social power relations that is often employed by those in power in order to achieve a certain outcome. Additionally, CDA was drawn upon in order to examine the manner in which discourse constructs social control, i.e. the guiding of one group over others by way of language (Wodak, 2009).

Plain language together with document design principles were applied in order to produce a policy document in a manner that is as easy and as user-friendly as possible in order for the reader to operate more effectively after internalising the text. Subsequently, they should not experience the need to acquire external sources in order to comprehend a particular document or text. It is with this awareness that this study explored the effects of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 on SU employees.

Lentz and Pander Maat (2004) believe that document design is a process of combining the varied goals of the text with the varied readers. Its objective is to not only combine the goals of the document with that of its readers, but also to consider financial and legal considerations.

Plain language writers endeavour to produce texts that correspond to the readers' level of understanding (DuBay, 2008) whereas document design principles affirm that successful communication does not depend on error free writing, but it is concerned with the degree to which the content of a text is understood by its readers (Shriver, 1997).

## OPSOMMING

Alle dokumente, insluitende beleidsdokumente, moet so duidelik, verstaanbaar en deursigtig as moontlik wees. Alle individue met 'n gemiddelde geletterdheidsvlak moet in staat wees om 'n teks te kan verstaan wanneer hulle dit vir die eerste keer lees, ongeag hul onderwyspeil. Dit sluit die akademiese personeel (C1), administratiewe/ondersteuningspersoneel (C2) en tegniese personeel (C3) van Universiteit Stellenbosch (US) in.

'n Teks is in gewone taal geskryf wanneer lesers die beoogde inligting kan vind, verstaan en toepas nadat hulle die teks slegs een keer gelees het. Vandaar Kimble (1996-1997) se opvatting dat gewone taal nie 'n vorm van “babataal” of verskraling is nie – dit is bloot 'n vorm van verstaanbare en bruikbare kommunikasie wat die lees en begrip van Voordelebeleid DV0406 3.3 kan bevorder.

Tydens in-diepte individuele onderhoude het hierdie studie juis ondersoek waarom lesers nie Voordelebeleid DV0406 3.3 verstaan nie. Verder het dit ondersoek ingestel na die gevolge wanneer beleidsdokumente in gewone taal en volgens die beginsels van dokumentontwerp geskryf is.

Die fokusgroepbesprekings het die toetsfase van hierdie studie uitgemaak en 'n ondersoek is gedoen om te bepaal in watter mate gewonetaaltegnieke die herontwerpte dokument deursigtiger en meer verstaanbaar maak.

Daarbenewens is Kritiese Diskoersanalise (KDA) gebruik om die dialoog te ondersoek wat in die Voordelebeleid DV0406 3.3 gebruik word. Dit het die kommunikatiewe metodes ondersoek wat deur diegene in magsposisies gebruik word. Daar is ondersoek ingestel na die gebruik van taal wat poog om sosiale magsverhoudinge te verbloem wat dikwels deur diegene gebruik word wat aan bewind is, ten einde 'n sekere resultaat te bereik. Daarbenewens is daar op KDA gesteun om die wyse te ondersoek waarop diskoers sosiale beheer onderhou, d.w.s. die kontrole van een groep oor ander deur middel van taal, (Wodak, 2009).

Duidelike taal en dokumentontwerpbeginsels is toegepas om die beleidsdokument so maklik en gebruikersvriendelik as moontlik te maak, sodat die leser meer effektief te werk kan gaan nadat sy/hy die teks geïnternaliseer het. Hulle moet gevolglik nie die behoefte ervaar om eksterne bronne te raadpleeg om 'n spesifieke dokument of teks te verstaan nie. Dit is met hierdie

bewustheid dat hierdie studie die effek van die Voordelebeleid DV0406 3.3 op US-werknemers ondersoek het.

Lentz and Pander Maat (2004) is van mening dat dokumentontwerp 'n proses volg om die uiteenlopende doelstellings van die teks met dié van die uiteenlopende lesers daarvan te kombineer. Die doel is egter nie om net dít te bereik nie, maar ook om finansiële en wetlike oorwegings in ag te neem.

Skrywers van gewone taal poog om tekste te produseer wat met die lesers se begripvlak ooreenstem (DuBay, 2008), terwyl toepassing van dokumentontwerpbeginsels tot gevolg het dat suksesvolle kommunikasie nie afhang van foutvrye skryfwerk nie, maar dat dit gaan oor die mate waartoe lesers die inhoud van 'n teks verstaan (Shriver, 1997).

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

First and foremost all praise and honour to my Heavenly Father for guiding me on this long and lonely journey.

To my supervisor Dr. Amanda Lourens, thank you for believing in my abilities even more than I did. I cannot imagine completing this study with anyone other than you by my side.

To my family, friends and colleagues, thank you for your support and for encouraging me to persevere.

To Mr. Victor Mothobi, Chief Director: Human Resources, thank you for permitting me the use of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3.

And last but not least, to my two fur babies, Emi and Jesse, thank you for your constant presence whilst I burnt the midnight oil, albeit snoring away at my feet.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background

Janssen and Neutelings (2001) describe policy documents as the unification of different parties, where each entertains its own viewpoint within an organisation. Writers make adjustments and modifications to the text at every level before all the various parties are satisfied with the end result (Janssen & Neutelings, 2001).

According to Janssen and Neutelings (2001), policy writers are thus concerned with satisfying their co-contributors. Their motivation is to conform to the familiarity of their organisational communication. Therefore, Janssen and Neutelings (2001) focus on being politically correct instead of being concerned about how their readers or intended audience will perceive their texts. Moreover, policy writers believe that if they employ specialised language they establish credibility and demonstrate a level of sophistication and expertise. Janssen and Neutelings (2001: 116) believe that “policy writers write strategically and aim at establishing consensus rather than writing a paper that is a nice read”.

According to Macheridis (2015), policy documents maintain and uphold the processes and procedures inside an organisation. Thus, when writers create policy documents, they follow the direction of their organisation. The aim is for outsiders to recognise the text as similar to that of the organisation; they should thus be unable to detect authorship (Freeman & Maybin, 2011).

Policy documents are ideological texts that are produced within a particular historical and political context (Codd, 1988). Therefore, the content of policy documents usually represents the organisation. Policy documents are often complicated and difficult to read and understand. They come across as ambiguous, impersonal and vague. In addition, they are filled with bureaucratic language and officialese. Often power, coercion and ambiguity obstruct the readability and understandability of policy documents by means of language (Codd, 1998).

Consequently, it has become necessary to investigate ways to reduce the language that organisations employ in order to simulate a collective consequence by its members, hence directing them into its desired mode of action (Codd, 1988).

As a result, one can deduce that all documentation, including policy documents, should be as clear, understandable and transparent as possible. An individual of average literacy should be able to understand any document when they read it for the first time regardless of their educational or literacy level. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural

Organization (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics defines literacy as the ability of people to read, write and understand written communication (UNESCO, 2018).

Organisations are usually more concerned with satisfying their co-contributors and to conform to the familiarity of their organisation's communication. Stellenbosch University as an organisation provides the context for the study of a policy document that was created to function within the Human Resources environment and that seeks to represent the University. Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3<sup>1</sup> is a Stellenbosch University (SU) policy document that concentrates on the guidelines regarding leave at the University for all SU employees, i.e. academic staff (C1), administrative/support staff (C2) and technical staff (C3). I considered the question of whether this document was produced to enable the readers to unmistakably act upon it. During my preliminary investigation, I had casual conversations with fellow employees, and it emerged that they do not fully understand this document. Hence, this study investigated precisely why readers do not seem to clearly understand Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3. Furthermore, it explored the significance of rewriting this policy document in plain language whilst also aligning it with the principles of document design. This corresponds closely to Kimble's (1996–1997) notion that plain language is not a form of "baby talk" or "dumbing down" the language – it is simply a form of comprehensible and useful communication.

I thus conducted an investigation to determine whether and to what extent plain language techniques render the redesigned document more transparent and understandable.

In addition, I employed critical discourse analysis (CDA) to investigate the dialogue that Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 employs. I drew on CDA to examine the manner in which discourse constructs social control, i.e. how one group uses language in order to direct another group (Wodak, 2009). I also engaged CDA to examine the communicative methods that those in power often use to disguise unequal social power relations and achieve their desired outcomes.

## **1.2 Research problem**

Language use, text organisation and lack of clarity are typical matters that cause employees to experience difficulties with documents. According to De Stadler, Basson and Luttig (2005), the writer should anticipate the readers' requirements i.e. the document should clearly instruct readers how to act. However, this was not the case as employees indicated during my initial informal discussions with them that they do not know how to act after they have read the text.

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<sup>1</sup>This is not the only policy document regarding leave at SU. There are other leave policy documents as well as other policy documents that refer to leave. They are also not all aligned. (Font size far too small to read. Changed to 8 point size.)

The problem statement of this study is formulated as follows: Staff members of SU perceive the Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 as difficult to use and understand. I therefore designed a study to investigate the target audience's actual responses to the text, and I subsequently rewrote the document to better suit their requirements. The effectiveness of the rewritten document was evaluated in a last phase.

Organisations employ language to serve a particular purpose. They construct particular meanings and signs to conceal social conflict and encourage commitment for the good of the organisation (Codd, 1988). In other words, the language that SU uses is unique to the University and its identity. In addition, SU employs language to motivate staff members to act according to the University's requirements.

Fairclough (2015) is of the opinion that group members construct meaning according to their respective surroundings, as communication requires collective environments. Therefore, I decided on in-depth individual interviews in the hope that participants would relay the meanings they derive from, as well as the difficulties they experience with, Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3.

The (hypo) thesis statement of this study is: The communicative effectiveness, i.e. the comprehensibility and usability, of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 can be enhanced by rewriting it in plain language and according to document design principles.

Document design aims to meet the communicative needs of individuals and organisations in current society. Thus, Janssen and Maes (1999) believe that document design wants to realise the desires of individuals as well as organisations. Therefore, if a document is written in plain language and according to document design principles, the document can meet the needs of the readers whilst at the same time conveying the image of the organisation (SU).

One of the objectives of this study is therefore to enhance readers' ability to engage with and understand Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 much better after I rewrote it in plain language and according to document design principles.

This was a very challenging study, as it did not build on any previous study regarding plain language and policy documents.

### **1.3 Research aims and objectives**

It is the writer's responsibility to ensure that the reader finds the text easy to read and understand. In order to achieve this objective, it is important that the writer anticipates the requirements that the reader might have regarding the text (De Stadler, Basson & Luttig, 2005).

Therefore, when I redesigned Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3, I applied both plain language and document design principles in order to produce a policy document that is easy to understand and user-friendly. The readers should be able to operate effectively after they internalised the text.

It is with this awareness that this study explored the effects of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 on a sample of SU employees. Policy writers write on behalf of an organisation. Their aim is to make their documents seem similar to the other documents in their organisation. It thus suits their own or their organisation's objectives when they follow the recognised and traditional communication techniques of their organisation.

It can thus be said that when writers create policy documents, they adhere to the direction of their organisation. They would prefer that outsiders recognise the image of the organisation within their documents and that they are unable to detect individual writers (Freeman & Maybin, 2011). Orlikowski and Yates (1994) claim that the policy writer maintain the approach of applying the established communicative practices of the organisation when they write policy documents.

Policy writers are aware that members of the same grouping usually refer to shared opinions about communication. They thus take advantage of those shared notions in order to influence group members to act accordingly. However, they almost never explicitly instruct them in any regard. Instead, they employ discreet methods and they usually succeed to convince group members to act in a certain manner. Codd (1988) reasons that organisations apply language in a subtle manner without explicitly directing group members. They want to suggest a collective meaning amongst members, hence they direct them to act in a fashion that the organisation desires.

Therefore, I used CDA to investigate the language use in Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 in order to explore approaches that attempt to disguise social power relations. One of the objectives of CDA is to look for instances where powerful groups are made to appear discreet within the text (Van Dijk, 1993).

The focus of this study is thus on the use of language in Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 and the effect of the meanings and interpretations that readers or SU employees attribute to it.

#### **1.4 Chapter overviews**

**This chapter** provides an overview and introduces this study. I outline the context of policy documents and describe how they operate within organisations. Furthermore, I state the aims and objectives of this study, which are that SU employees should understand Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 clearly after I have rewritten it in plain language and according to document design principles.

**Chapter 2** contains literature that is relevant to policy documents, plain language, document design and CDA. I could not find previous studies on policy documents written in plain language, therefore none are included as previous research in the field. Furthermore, I discuss each topic separately, but I also portray how they are interconnected with each other. Additionally, I explain how they can work together in order to achieve the end goal of this study.

In **Chapter 3** I describe my desire that this study will prompt Human Resources (HR) to implement the conclusions of this study. I also explain why I use two qualitative research methods (in-depth individual interviews and focus groups) and to what extent both methods are relevant for this study. I describe the procedures that I used to recruit research participants and the focus group discussions (the test phase of this study).

In **Chapter 4** I systematically discuss the data that I obtained during the individual interviews. I detail the conclusions that I reached based on the feedback of participants. In view of this information, I rewrote Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 in plain language and according to document design principles. Additionally, I explain and clarify my choices regarding the redesign process.

**Chapter 5** contains a description of how focus group members received the redesigned document. I relay their experiences and emotions regarding different sections of the document. Additionally, I systematically illustrate the changes that I made to the redesigned document in relation to their feedback. In the event that I did not change certain aspects, I set out my reasons accordingly.

I conclude this study in **Chapter 6** with a final summary of the findings of this study. Additionally, I explain the implications should SU's HR division implement the findings. I also offer suggestions for further research.

## **1.5 Delineation of this study**

The focus of this study is on Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3, the policy delineating the leave policy at SU. The other SU documents that pertain to leave were, however, not part of the scope of this study.

Moreover, it is very important to note that the *content* of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 did not form part of this study, but the core focus was the organisation, readability, comprehensibility etc. of the content.

Additionally, Sun-e-HR (SU's employee electronic self-service system) also did not form part of this study regardless of the fact that employees use this platform to apply for leave at the University.



Furthermore, this study only included the perceptions and experiences of SU employees that are permanently employed at the University. As there are several forms of employment that exist at SU, it is not possible or feasible to investigate them all. By only focusing on one document, it was my premise that conclusions attained will be much more significant.

### **1.6 Limitations of the study**

The main aim of this study is to assess the factors that influence why readers do not understand Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 clearly. Therefore, I conducted a thorough analysis regarding those factors during the in-depth individual interviews. Additionally, I explored employees' reactions to and understanding of the redesigned document during the focus group discussions. However, the fact that it was difficult for participants to not focus on the content of both documents was a major limitation of this study.

Additionally, the contradictions between the different leave policies and between those documents and the daily operations at SU proved to be a main drawback for this study. Participants drew on their own past experiences, which often refuted the content of Benefits Policy DV 0406 3.3. This caused much perplexity during the data gathering process.

### **1.7 Practical significance and recommendations**

When documents are transparent and have a clearly defined goal and readers are able to grasp their content immediately and act accordingly, the need for supplementary explanation is eliminated. Hence, after reading a text, the reader, or in this case the employee, should be able to proceed without spending time trying to understand its meaning. In this way, time and resources will not be wasted and HR will be able to focus on more pressing issues.

Renkema, Hoeken and Spooren (1999) maintain that organisations incur huge losses due to documents that are badly designed. These losses are not just monetary in nature, but include and are not limited to loss of face, time and resources. Hence, by implementing the redesigned document (second draft), HR can prevent such losses due to poorly drafted documents.

Currently, SU has different leave documents, which serves to confuse readers as the content of these documents contradict one another. Additionally, some sections of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 also contradict one another, therefore HR should review the parity between them as well as between the different documents and Sun-e-HR (SU's employee electronic self-service system).

## **2 CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Introduction**

#### **2.1.1 Background and preliminary research**

Policy documents are often complicated and difficult to comprehend. They come across as ambiguous, impersonal and vague. In addition, they are filled with bureaucratic language and officialese. Often, power, coercion and ambiguity obstruct the readability and clarity of policy documents, with the result that readers do not understand what the text is trying to convey.

It has therefore become necessary to investigate methods with which to alter the formal and guarded language that organisations employ when they attempt to direct their members to proceed according to their desired cause of action (Codd, 1988).

According to Fairclough (2015), critical discourse analysis (CDA) represents a quest for enlightenment. I will thus employ this method to investigate why the discourse in policy documents occurs in the manner that it does.

It is with this perception that this study will observe the effect of the Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 after I have applied document design principles. At the same time, I will rewrite the text into plain language. I will draw on CDA to examine the tone of the document, the authority it speaks with and the meanings that its readers or staff members of the University ascribe to it.

Therefore, this study will consider the possibilities and the effects of how plain language and document design principles will function in the Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3. I concluded that this policy could be improved after my initial exploration, during which fellow staff members and colleagues indicated that the Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 currently contains ambiguous and complicated terms.

One of the objectives of plain language is that individuals from different educational backgrounds should be able to understand a text after reading it for the first time. Subsequently, they should not experience the need to consult external sources in order to comprehend a particular document. Plain language endeavours to produce texts that correspond to the readers' level of understanding (DuBay, 2008). In the same way, document design principles affirm that successful communication does not depend on error-free writing but is concerned with the degree to which its readers understand the content of a text (Schrivver, 1997). The text should thus speak to the needs of the reader and enable her/him to firstly, understand it clearly; and secondly, it should enable the reader to act unmistakably thereupon.

Plain language, together with document design principles, could thus be very influential in this regard as it could signify the end of complex policy documents and enhance its comprehension. As Kimble (1996–1997:2) puts it: “Plain language is not only the great clarifier; it improves accuracy as well”. This notion agrees with that of Shriver (1991) who claims that plain language writers and designers do not want to suppress any complicated information or stipulations, but they rather want to simplify text and increase readers’ understanding. Therefore, plain language writers does not aim to create mundane texts but rather desires to converse with the reader at her/his level of understanding in order for the reader to grasp the message of the text without having any doubts about its meaning.

Schrive (2010) states that a text is written in plain language when its readers are able to discover, understand and apply the intended information after only reading the text once. Kimble (1996–1997:1) agrees with this notion when he argues that plain language is not a form of “baby talk” or “dumbing down” the language – it is simply a form of comprehensible and useful communication. In other words, the writer endeavours to convey the message of the text as clearly, simplistic and straight forward as possible.

Successful communication is no longer dependant on error-free writing; rather, it requires consideration of the readers (Schrive, 1997). The intention of document design is to realise the needs of individuals and organisations, including the general public (Jansen & Maes, 1999). Hence, writers should always consider the needs of the average Joe Public whilst they produce policy documents.

Thus, when writers apply document design principles to policy documents, they should always keep the needs of the reader in mind. At the same time, they should recognise the aims of the organisation on whose behalf the policy document is written. In so doing, the readability and comprehensibility of the document will be improved whilst the text also meets the requirements of the organisation.

Subsequently, I will discuss policy documents, plain language, document design and CDA independently. By setting them apart, the characteristics, benefits, functions and drawbacks of each discipline will become clearer.

### **2.1.2 Organisation of literature review**

Within this framework, I will consider the characteristics and various definitions of policy documents. I will also assess how they function within organisations. Additionally, I will highlight the inconvenience that ambiguous texts cause readers.

Respectively, I will relay comprehensive accounts of plain language, document design and CDA regarding its definitions, implementation and benefits. Additionally, I will observe the views and studies by prominent scholars in the relevant fields, as well as the criticism against each discipline.

Lastly, I will accentuate how to apply plain language and document design principles in texts. In addition, I will highlight the benefits it could bring about to both text presentation and readers' ability to understand policy documents. I will draw on CDA in order to reveal how the powerful applies vague language in the text as a method to disguise their power and objections.

## **2.2 Policy documents**

### **2.2.1 Policy documents within organisations**

Producing policy documents within an organisation is usually a long and collaborative process, involving the merging of ideas. When writers produce policy documents, it is paramount that all the parties involved in the writing or producing process should reach consensus. All the stakeholders have to agree to the document and they must be satisfied that their interests are being met.

In the words of Janssen and Neutelings (2001: 116): "Policy writers write strategically and aim at establishing consensus rather than writing a paper that is a nice read." Policy writers are thus concerned with satisfying their co-contributors. They want to meet the requirements of their organisational communication, and they are more concerned about being politically correct than troubled about how their readers or intended audience will perceive their text.

Therefore, policy documents are the result of a process that are subject to many changes, modifications and amendments during its development, with the various role-players each conveying their own agenda, context and background.

According to Macheridis (2015), policy documents maintain and uphold the processes and procedures inside an organisation. It can then be said that when writers create policy documents, they adhere to the direction of their organisation, since outsiders should not be able to detect authorship. They would rather prefer that readers recognise the institution or organisation within their texts (Freeman & Maybin, 2011). The policy document and its functions have become part of organisations and their shared existence (Macheridas, 2015).

Orlikowski and Yates (1994) concur by saying that policy writers maintain the approach to apply the established language function of the organisation when they produce policy documents. As they write on behalf of an organisation, they are inclined to follow the recognised and traditional

communication techniques of the organisation; therefore, they will be seen to correspond with the identity of the organisation.

An organisation thus applies styles or methods of communication that are recognised and familiar within that particular organisation.

### **2.2.2 Definition of policy documents**

Fulcher (1989) describes policy as the result of struggles between opposing objectives that employ language without stipulations. Each party in the policy writing process arrives with their own insight. Therefore, they then resolve to use language in a manner that portrays their own goals in the text. This often means that they do not keep their audience in mind. In addition, Fimyar (2014) perceives policy documents as the end result of several drafts, outlines and concessions.

To Maguire and Ball (1994), public policy is a complex process that involves conflicts and negotiation from various sources and beginnings up to its actual implementation, whilst Yeatman (1991) thinks that policymaking is a struggle over meaning. During the policy writing process, all role-players naturally undertake to convey their own goals in the document; however, they make certain compromises, and the resulting policy document is a combination of all the policy writers' own perceptions.

Janssen and Neutelings (2001) describe policy documents as a union by different parties, where each party entertains their own viewpoint within an organisation. Freeman and Maybin (2011) also agree with this notion, as they are convinced that policy documents are the result of a collective process involving numerous role-players. However, all role-players form their own interpretation of the text as policy writers cannot enforce one specific meaning of their texts. Since policy texts are usually ambiguous and complex, policy writers cannot control the way in which readers perceive and understand their texts.

According to Janssen and Neutelings (2001), policy writers make adjustments and modifications to the document or text at every level before all the parties are satisfied with the end result. This is especially true within organisations, where policy writing is usually a process that involves a whole team of people. However, Janssen and Neutelings (2001) base their perceptions on studies performed in the Netherlands with Dutch civil servants during the policy producing formation. However, even though we can make inferences from the Dutch study, the perceptions do not necessarily represent the view of South Africans.

Codd (1988) describes policy documents as ideological texts that have been produced within a particular historical and political context. In other words, policy documents are created during a certain period that surrounds certain circumstances.

Therefore, it can be said that the end result of a policy document is indeed an amalgamation of perspectives, and that the document would have gone through many changes before it is implemented. Role-players make several compromises that affect their individual viewpoints. The image, background and context of the organisation remain at the forefront throughout this decision-making process. However, these role-players do not necessarily consider the comprehensibility of the text. Furthermore, since writers often create policy documents in particular eras and situations, the question also arises if the language used at that time is still relevant and up to date.

### **2.2.3 Objectives of policy documents**

#### **2.2.3.1 Policy documents as ideological texts**

Codd (1988) observes that policy documents are often not understood in the way it was intended to be understood. He calls it an investigation of communication that is developed within a materialistic theory of language. Conversely, policy makers are often self-centred as they assume the meanings that readers will derive from the text; they do not consider that all readers will form their own individual understanding and opinion of the text.

Policy documents represent conflicting contexts and rival interests as opposite discourses. Therefore, Taylor (1997) believes that the outcomes of policy effects are by no means certain or predictable. Since policy documents represent opposing objectives that lead to a range of end results, one cannot anticipate its consequences.

Owing to her theory of CDA, Taylor (2004) agrees somewhat with Codd; she focuses on how texts illustrate the world, social relationships and social identities. She also draws attention to how relations of power ideologically shape these practices. The more powerful parties are usually the ones who make the policy or who write the policy texts. Thus, they have the power to influence how the less powerful perceive these policies or their organisation through the manner in which they employ language in their documents.

Whilst Codd (1988) outlines an alternative of textual deconstruction to critically examine the ideological effects of policy documents, he observes the exercise of political power and the language that is used to justify that process. He then highlights that notion when he considers

that the state creates policy documents that represent the official discourse of the state (Codd, 1988). Discourse here refers to the communication that is particular to the state or organisations.

Orlikowski and Yates (1994) agree with their observation that the policy writer maintains the established language use of the organisation when they create policy documents. As they write on behalf of an organisation, they follow the recognised and traditional communication techniques of the organisation. It will therefore be seen that they uphold the image of the organisation.

Codd (1988) is of the opinion that the state uses language in order to serve a political purpose. The state thus constructs particular meanings and signs that conceal social conflict and advance commitment to the notion of a universal public interest. From Codd's (1988) point of view, organisations apply language in a supreme and agreeable fashion in order to suggest a collective end result by its members. Hence, they direct their members into their desired mode of action.

Thus, more often than not policy documents represent everything an organisation stands for. As the organisation creates policy documents to regulate and guide the principles as well as the operation of the organisation, they serve the interests of the organisation. In the process, those policy writers lose sight of their readers' needs. If they applied document design principles, they would have created documents that improved people's ability to act accordingly (Schriver, 1997).

Taylor's (2004) view is similar to Codd's when she maintains that these discursive and language issues have an influence on how people read and implement policy texts. It suggests that the ideological language used in the policy texts certainly does have an effect on how readers will perceive it.

Codd challenges how these policy documents function by using a form of textual analysis to examine the content of the language in policy documents. In particular, he refers to an extract of an official policy document, "The Curriculum Review", launched in New Zealand in 1987 (Codd, 1988). In Codd's (1988) view, the language use signifies ideological humanism; it predicts social harmony and a very ideal set of circumstances: "The learner is at the heart of all educational planning. Learning is the distinctive purpose of schools. Learning happens best when there is an active partnership of students, teachers, families and the community" (The Curriculum Review, 1987: 8, in Codd, 1988).

According to Codd (1988), the above paragraph exemplifies the ideological language that organisations use when they create policy documents. He claims that when policy writers



undertake to conform to the familiarity of their organisational communication, they are being politically correct and constructing texts in order to preserve ideological power relations.

The society described throughout “The Curriculum Review” (1987, in Codd, 1988) predicts an ideal, balanced set of conditions with no hint of racism or sexism. It promises success for all students. It does not mention the contradictions and inconsistencies within the real unequal society we find ourselves in. Furthermore, the text does not reveal any conflict of interest and economic constraints. Therefore, the use of this style of language corresponds with Codd’s (1988) notion of the ideological language that organisations use in policy documents, as these demonstrations do not occur in the real world.

This is also evident in the linguistic approaches in policy documents that aim to conceal inconsistencies and misrepresentations, as for example can be seen in the use of positive language in Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3. The text conceals everything that the employee is not permitted and focuses on what is indeed acceptable. However, the text infers to the underlying understanding that the employee will in fact assume what the consequences may be if they do not adhere to the rules, even if it is not stated explicitly. The following paragraph in Benefits Policy (DV0406 3.3.2.a) that speaks about maternity leave is an example of such an instance: “Each female employee will be allowed a maximum of nine months’ maternity leave at full cost of employment (COE) for all her confinements combined.” This sentence does not explicitly clarify amongst how many pregnancies the female employee should divide the nine months maternity leave. Nor does it clearly state the implications or consequences for the employee in the case that these nine months of maternity leave are depleted and she falls pregnant again. Therefore, it can be said that this sentence could lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations because the reader would be unsure of how to proceed after reading Benefits Policy (DV0406 3.3.2.a).

#### 2.2.3.2 Functioning of policy documents

Janssen and Neutelings (2001) focus on policy writers and their need to create consensus amongst the collaborating members in the writing process, whilst each of them discloses different interests, opinions and goals. Policy documents are frequently seen as a collective resolve because the end product is often the result of a collaborative process (Janssen & Neutelings, 2001).

Policy writers thus settle on the use of vague and uncertain language as a tactical strategy in policy documents. In so doing, they give the impression that they have reached consensus regarding the content of the text (Janssen & Neutelings, 2001). In other words, policy writers



attempt to conceal their differing opinions and positions by using ambiguous and vague language and not explicitly committing to a particular standpoint. An example of such vague and ambiguous language is evident in Benefits Policy (DV0406 3.3.3.b): “The employees concerned must be appointed permanently and must have been in SU’s employ for at least two years.” This sentence does not make it clear whether an employee could also be employed on a contract basis in order to qualify for a study opportunity.

In turn, Maguire and Ball (1994) are more concerned with the policy than the policy makers. They focus on how these texts develop into practice; how readers interpret and engage with them. The same example (DV0406 3.3.3.b) again relates to this notion. Staff members can interpret this clause or section in different ways. Different people or departments could thus implement this policy in different ways. For instance, some staff members will qualify for study opportunities after working at SU on a temporary basis for at least two years, whilst others who are permanently employed for less than two years will not qualify for this opportunity.

Janssen and Neutelings (2001) investigate why the readers of policy documents have difficulty in understanding them and how these documents could be improved. According to them, readers often complain that policy documents are impersonal, difficult to read and difficult to understand. The example above can provide an answer to the question posed by Janssen and Neutelings: If the text clearly states when employees would qualify for study opportunities, readers will find it less troublesome and easy to understand. The sentence should either state that only permanent employees who have worked at SU for at least two years would qualify, or it should read that all employees (permanent, contract or part-time) who have worked at SU for at least two years would qualify.

According to document design principles, the responsibility remains with the writer to consider the needs of the reader and to ensure that the reader finds the text easy to read and understand (De Stadler, Basson & Luttig, 2005). In order to achieve this objective, the writers of policy documents should anticipate the needs of their audience might have regarding the text. They should thus endeavour to use simple language that is easy to understand in their documents. That being said, had the writer of the mentioned example kept the needs of the reader in mind, they would have anticipated that the reader would expect more clarity from that sentence.

Professionals like lawyers, economists and sociologists who have no formal training in writing often engage in writing policy documents, with communication obscurity as a result (Janssen & Neutelings, 2001). Policy writers furthermore often take a strategic decision to create documents with bureaucratic characteristics. They believe that if they employ specialised language they establish credibility and demonstrate a level of sophistication and expertise (Janssen &

Neutelings, 2001). According to them, if they write in this manner, their documents appear very important and significant.

As they write on behalf of an organisation, policy writers are inclined to follow the recognised and traditional communication techniques of the organisation. In doing so, their documents are similar to other documents in their organisation and they also fulfil their own objectives, or those of their organisation.

However, Janssen and Neutelings (2001) are of the opinion that in order to satisfy the needs of all their various representatives, policy writers often have to find compromises. They have to revise, alter and amend texts until everyone involved in the policy writing processes are comfortable with the end product (Janssen & Neutelings, 2001).

In addition, they (who?) note that the vague, impersonal texts that contain bureaucratic language or officialese may merely be due to the frequent use of the passive voice or abstract or subtle theories and metaphors, to name but a few (Janssen & Neutelings, 2001).

Janssen and Neutelings (2001) do, however, identify several strategies that policy writers apply in order to enable them to incorporate the positions of the diverse contributors (Janssen & Neutelings, 2001). The use of ambiguous wording and objections in policy documents are strategies which permit readers to maintain their own meaning whilst they simultaneously accept that they agree with their group (Janssen & Neutelings, 2001). This means that as policy writers reach consensus about the content of the policy documents that they produce, they are not mindful of the fact that readers will infer a different meaning from the text than what the policy writers initially intended.

Nonetheless, Janssen and Neutelings (2001) concede that they cannot fully work out why policy writers employ their specific adjustments and text features.

According to Dulek (in Janssen & Neutelings, 2001: 179) writing effectively is not the principal problem that policy writers encounter. Their most important constraint is the complex environment (the organisation) in which they are expected to write. Hence, they do in fact write with their readers in mind, and they are well aware of their multiple audiences.

Taylor (1997) agrees with this notion from her focus on the process of policy making; she has come to the conclusion that language and meaning are often taken for granted. It can then be said that when writers create policy documents, they adhere to the direction of their organisation. Outsiders should not be able to detect authorship, but readers should recognise the text to belong to the institution or organisation (Freeman & Maybin, 2011). Orlikowski and Yates (1994)

concur and say that the policy writer consistently applies the established communicative standards of the organisation when they write policy documents.

The French linguist Ducrot was the first to describe a concept of polyphony. This is based on the concept that people can hear several voices within one single remark, to which they can assign part of the utterance. Maguire and Ball (1994) agree with this notion that different interpretations compete with one another as they speak to different concerns of people or readers. Polyphony marking text characteristics enable writers to integrate the viewpoints of the various associates, thereby accommodating various viewpoints (Janssen & Neutelings, 2001).

Janssen and Neutelings (2001:214–215) explain this incidence as follows:

The empirical speaker or writer is the person who physically produces the utterance; he presents the voices and lets them express various points of view. In this way, every utterance can be considered as a ‘crystallized’ dialogue between different voices that represent different discourse individuals. The position of the empirical speaker can become clear either as a result of the fact that he places himself in agreement with some discourse individual or as a result of the fact that he dissociates himself from some discourse individual.

Kennedy was *not* a great president – in this one sentence two opposite viewpoints can be identified:

Viewpoint 1: Kennedy was a great president

Viewpoint 2: Viewpoint 1 is not the case

Since these two different viewpoints cannot be attributed to the same person, we must assume the (theoretical) presence of at least two different discourse individuals. In normal communication, utterance 1 would not make sense if no individual existed that would hold vp 1. Viewpoint 2 corresponds with the viewpoint of the speaker who is the same as the empirical speaker or writer. Viewpoint 1 does not correspond with the viewpoint of the speaker, but with someone else’s. The use of the negation in this utterance can be explained by the speaker’s desire to show that there is or has been someone who thinks that Kennedy was a great president; a standpoint with which the writer disagrees. The idea that viewpoints other than the writer’s can be (re)presented in the text and that these individual viewpoints can – but do not have to – be marked at the sentence level by actual text features (Nølke 1992), which we call *polyphony marking text features*. (Janssen & Neutelings 2001:215)

Numerous readers could thus deduce a variety of readings or meanings from one text. This could also be exactly what the writer intended; therefore, the creators of policy documents might intentionally make texts’ meaning unclear and ambiguous. Policy writers use language in such a manner that readers of the text could derive different meanings from it.

For example, the following extract from Benefits Policy (DV0406. 3.3.5.c) that explains compassionate leave contains ambiguities and indistinctness:

Compassionate leave for a portion of a day or for one day or for one or more full days may be granted in the following instances:

- The death of an employee's spouse, parent, parent-in law, adoptive parent, grandparent, *child*, *grandchild* or sibling, or family member.

This could explain Codd's (1988) notion that texts contain conflicting meanings, contradictions and structured omissions so that different effects are produced on different readers.

## 2.3 Plain language

### 2.3.1 Background of plain language

Near the end of the twentieth century, a need for understandable documents became apparent globally. People realised that they no longer have to endure the "gobbledygook" in government and business texts, which led the plain language movement to demand communication that readers can clearly understand (Schrivier, 1997).

By the end of the 1970s, the most evident support of this movement arose when then United States of America's (USA) president Jimmy Carter issued an executive order to render federal regulations in a much clearer, effortless and cost effective manner. A condition was that the main policy documents of the USA should be as simple and clear as possible. It had to be written in plain English so that people who had to fulfil its terms could understand them (Schrivier, 1997).

Consequently, New York became the first American state to approve a plain language law, and by the early 1990s, eight states followed suit. More recently, President Barack Obama signed the American Plain Writing Act of 2010: [1]. This is perceived as an immense source of inspiration for plain language (Cornelius, 2015).

Although the USA made great strides to implement plain language, other countries like the United Kingdom (UK), Australia and Canada were also involved in the plain language movement (Schrivier, 1997). In the UK, the case that ordinary people are also entitled to understand the law was made in the 1960s, and the use of plain language has greatly improved since then (Bekink & Botha, 2007), with support from esteemed bureaucrats in the UK ensuring that plain language remains relevant. In 1985, the Prime Minister at the time, Margaret Thatcher, attended a Plain English exhibition that was hosted by the Civil Service and the Plain English Campaign (Schrivier, 1997), which indicated the government's support for this movement.

John Walton, a solicitor from the UK, formed *Clarity*, an international association that promotes plain language. He was wondering if his peers agree that legal writing was outdated and obscured. After he discovered that they in fact shared his sentiment, *Clarity* took off in the UK.

Since then the organisation has grown exponentially to a global association that comprises a membership of over 1000 people from more than 30 countries (McBeth, 2002).

### **2.3.2 Defining plain language**

Cornelius (2015) is of the opinion that since the start of the Plain Language Movement in the United States of America, as well as elsewhere in the world, a proper definition of plain language is yet to be determined.

Critics of the plain language movement deduce that what may seem plain and concise to some people might puzzle others (Shriver, 1991). In Shriver's (1991) view, the fact that one cannot concisely define plain language has led plain language critics to contend that it can mean anything from shortening complicated sentence structures to completely redrafting texts. According to Mazur (2000), if you ask ten people to explain plain language, you will get ten different responses.

The international community lauds the definition of plain language as set out in Section 22 (2) of the South African Consumer Protection Act (CPA) because it precisely indicates the required style, grammar and wording as well as structure, content and design of a document written in plain language (Burt, 2009).

### **2.3.3 Characteristics of plain language**

According to DuBay (2008), the objective of plain language is to close the literacy gap, as everyone does not have the same reading skills. Plain language writers endeavour to produce texts that correspond to the readers' level of understanding.

**Plain Language Guidelines** (Kimble, 1996–1997): According to Kimble, plain language drafters should:

- Pay attention to document design issues, including typeface, white space, etc.
- Use short sentences and split up longer ones.
- Group connected ideas together.
- Use several headings.
- Place the key act in verbs and not in theoretical nouns. Ensure there is not too much information before or between the main subject, verb and object.
- Remove unnecessary words and detail.
- Use simple, direct, familiar, human words.

- Avoid *shall* and use *must* instead.
- Write in the active voice.
- Use examples, tables and charts where necessary.

Questions of the Plain Language Commission (2011) in the UK to determine if a document is written in plain English or not (in Cornelius, 2015) include the following:

- Is the **purpose** of the text clear and obvious from the onset?
- Is the **content** of the text organised accurately?
- Is the information relevant and complete?
- Does the given information anticipate readers' questions?
- Is the meaning of technical terms clearly defined or explained?
- Is the information (**structure**) in the text well organised?
- Is the text easy to navigate? Does it contain appropriate headings and subheadings?
- Does the text use visual aids appropriately? Is the **style and grammar** fitting for the readers?
- Are the paragraphs relatively short?
- Is the text written in the active voice?
- Is the document free from **pretentious, longwinded** and **bureaucratic** language?
- Is the grammar and punctuation in the text correct?
- Does the document look good and is easy to read? (Layout and design)

When I looked at Benefits Policy (DV0406 3.3.2.a) ("Each female employee will be allowed a maximum of nine months' maternity leave at full CEO including all her all her confinements combined"), I had the guidelines, set out by Kimble above, in mind. The word *confinements* caught my attention and I replaced it with a more direct and simple phrase to read: "Each female employee will be allowed a maximum of nine (9) months' maternity leave at full CEO including all her *expected delivery dates*." It is my opinion that it is simpler, more direct, more humane and more modern.

Average people, including SU employees, do not use words like 'confinements', and this seems to be a clear example of how policy writers use words and phrases that they think will make their documents look important and substantial. However, it seems pretentious and longwinded, and it contains a bureaucratic word which means that it would not qualify as plain language according

to the determinations of plain language as set out by the Plain Language Commission (2011) (in Cornelius, 2015) above.

### **2.3.4 Criticism of plain language**

Many spheres of society have come to appreciate plain language; however, it is not yet a convention that people generally accept and ascribe to. Strong opposition to this movement exists that stems stridently from the law profession.

According to Hunt (2002), it is only possible to achieve legislative intent if the law profession uses special language. It is burdened to meet certain legal demands, and consequently it cannot be set out simply. He goes on to say that laypersons do not read laws; it is only the police, judiciary, the law-regulatory bodies and those who understand the law that read the law (Hunt, 2002). Coshott (2014) supports this notion as he claims that people with no legal awareness will not understand the law as it is too intricate.

However, as the CPA includes a comprehensive definition of plain and understandable language, one can easily dismiss this notion. The CPA requires that complicated notions and texts are described in simple, clear terms that are easy to use and understand. This is precisely because these documents are read by people who do not possess any intricate knowledge of the law (Stroop & Chürr, 2013). However, I will discuss the CPA and how it relates to plain language in more detail later on in this chapter.

James (2016) closely relates to this notion with the belief that people will figure out the meaning of texts regardless of the technical terms that they contain since complicated language give the impression of being important. As most readers are well read, they are familiar with law-making sentence structures and other styles of writing approaches; they will thus be able to modify their understanding accordingly (Stark, 1996).

Consequently, to change the drafting style of each piece of legislation to match the audience would lead to inconsistencies within the statute book, resulting in grave implications for interpretation. It would also detract from both the consistency and quality of legislation. From this viewpoint, plain language in the law is simply unattainable (Hunt, 2002). Coshott (2014) agrees with this notion as he is of the opinion that the law commands meticulousness that ordinary discourse like plain language cannot achieve.

On the other hand, we can observe an instance that contradicts this notion in the Constitution of South Africa. Plain language was used as drafters applied the active voice and used simple, direct words like ‘everyone’ instead of ‘every person’. In addition, they removed the word ‘shall’ and they used bullet points in order to group connected ideas.



Stark (1996) based his theory on the opinion that when writers draft laws, it is more important that the drafter focuses on the precision of the text instead of how clearly the reader will understand the text. Hence, Stark does not give any regard to the reader and their needs. He firmly believes that the writer should be more concerned about articulating the text regardless of whether the reader finds it easy to understand or not.

He rejects George Gopen's<sup>2</sup> (1987) theory that a reader will not make an effort to understand a text fully if the reader has to expend their energy in order to do so. Gopen (1987) believes that when a reader has to figure out the sentence structure or the relations between sentences, the reader will no longer have the drive to figure out what idea(s) the writer is trying to convey.

Hence, Gopen's theory closely corresponds to the position of document design that documents should be made as easy and user-friendly as possible in order for the reader to operate effectively after they have read the text. Readers will become frustrated and give up if they do not understand the meaning of the text and if they cannot act accordingly after they read the text for the first time. Schriver (2010) agrees with this notion as she believes that readers will be able to discover, understand and also apply the intended information in the proposed fashion after they read the text only once when it is written in plain language.

Below is a comparison of an original text from the *Uniform Commercial Code*, a general and inclusive group of laws regulating business, adopted by some states in the USA. Gopen and Stark both rewrote this passage according to their own respective theories.

Table 2.1 Comparison between Stark and Gopen's writing styles

Original Uniform Commercial Code (Stark, 1996: 211).	Uniform Commercial Code revised by Gopen according to his principles on reader expectation theory (Gopen, 1987: 118).
<p>'1-102 (3) Variation by Agreement</p> <p>The effect of provisions of this Act may be varied by agreement,</p> <p>except as otherwise provided in this Act and except that the obligations of good faith, diligence, reasonableness and care prescribed by this Act may not be disclaimed by agreement but by the parties may be agreement determine the standards by which the performance of such obligations is to be measured if such standards are not manifestly unreasonable.</p>	<p>'1-102 (3) Variation by Agreement</p> <p>Parties are free to agree to vary the effects of the provisions of this Act except</p> <p>when this Act explicitly provides otherwise; and</p> <p>when this Act prescribes obligations of good faith, diligence, reasonableness and care.</p> <p>When the obligations listed in Section 1-102 (3) (b) are involved, parties may agree to determine the standards by which the performance of the obligations is to be</p>

<sup>2</sup> George Gopen is the creator of The Reader Expectations Approach.



	measured, as long as those standards are not manifestly unreasonable.
Stark (1996: 215) proposed the following formulation according to his theory of the writer focusing on themselves.	
<p>1-102 (3) Variation Permitted; Exceptions.</p> <p>Parties may agree to vary any provisions of this chapter unless either of the following conditions applies:</p> <p>This chapter explicitly prohibits variation of the provision.</p> <p>This chapter requires good faith, diligence, reasonableness or care in regard to the provision.</p> <p>1-102 (4) Agreement on Standards</p> <p>Parties may agree on the standards by which performance of the obligations under sub. (3) (b) are to be measured, if those standards are not manifestly unreasonable.</p>	

Stark (1996) mentioned quite a number of what he considers “errors” in the above passage; however, for the sake of brevity, only the most notable ones are discussed here.

He contends that Gopen’s revision of the above passage contains many errors. The most substantive is the broken-up long sentence and the use of “except” at the end of the introduction as well as “and” at the end of (a). Stark believes that Gopen has subsequently changed the meaning of the text (Stark, 1996).

He states that when Gopen uses the words as noted previously, he changes the meaning and also the context of the text. He also points out that Gopen’s use of “when” in order to launch the obligations renders the text ambiguous. It is now unclear whether the obligations are relevant to the terms that may or may not be diverse (Stark, 1996).

Stark (1996) also mentions that Gopen do not meet the readers’ expectations because of the wrong word choice, unconventional phrases (e.g. “are free to”) and vagueness in the text.

Stark (1996) corrected Gopen’s errors and believes that his version is a significant improvement, especially concerning its accuracy. He is of the view that it is more important for a text to be accurate than to be transparent or understandable (Stark, 1996). Stark’s (1996) position is that when a writer produces text, they should not focus on the reader or the text, but rather on themselves. He thus applied that principle in his revision above.

To this day, there remains a great divide, not just within the legal profession, but between those that believe plain language could be to their benefit and those that are dead-set against it. Many arguments against plain language include justifications that the organisation has been writing like that for years or that plain language would render the document less professional. They do not realise that it is possible for documentation to be both professional and plain (James, 2016).

However, Coshott (2014: 552) is of the opinion that “the tide is turning against legalese”. He acknowledges that legal clients nowadays demand clear and understandable documents from their lawyers. Therefore, he concedes that the benefits of plain language outweigh the arguments against it.

Assy (2011) elaborates further on this theory with the premise that plain language could improve the quality and efficiency of lawyers’ service to their clients. However, she cautions that laypersons should not perceive plain language as a method with which to make the law fully understandable. She thus recognises that plain language has its weaknesses; therefore, it should not operate independently from the law even though it can be beneficial (Assy, 2011).

In contrast to Assy’s viewpoint, the story of Mr. Mothle discussed later on in this chapter clearly indicates how a lay person could gain access to the law through plain language.

### **2.3.5 Plain language in South Africa**

In South Africa plain language is a somewhat novel development (Cornelius, 2015). Before the dawn of democracy in 1994, the use of plain language was of no concern to the previous government (Viljoen & Nienaber, 2001). The new government genuinely attempted to produce a truly accessible document that all South Africans can understand when they drafted the 1996 Constitution (Bekink & Botha, 2007).

However, since then consumer protection in South Africa provided momentum for plain language by way of legislation. According to Burt (2009), this is in view of the fact that the law is the only apparatus to promptly redress injustices that took place during our country’s oppressive past. Therefore, the government emphasised that all forms of communication should be as clear and effective as possible (Bekink & Botha, 2007).

In 1995, during his opening address at a seminar called *Plain language, the law and the right to information*, the then Minister of Justice, Dullah Omar, stressed the importance that ordinary people should not just be able to understand legal communication, but all other government documentation as well. The then minister regarded the frankness of language as an assurance of democracy that should be the starting point to address people’s right to information, as is safeguarded in our Constitution. He goes further by stating that in order for people to exercise those rights in a democracy, they should be able to fully comprehend and realise those rights (Viljoen & Nienaber, 2001).

### **2.3.6 Multilingualism and multiculturalism in South Africa**

The then Minister of Justice, Dullah Omar highlighted several challenges unique to South Africa that we have to overcome in order to establish a convention of using plain language in the South African landscape. One of those unique challenges is the multilingual society of South Africa (Viljoen & Nienaber, 2001).

There are 11 official languages in South Africa. Omar affirmed that it would be inadequate to translate ambiguous English or Afrikaans into a similar ambiguous indigenous language, as the last thing we want is 11 versions of nonsense (Viljoen & Nienaber, 2001).

Bekink and Botha (2007) note that there is a need for multilingual terminology in multilingual societies. They believe that SA should develop standard ideas and vocabulary in order to avoid confusion (Bekink & Botha, 2007).

Furthermore, multilingualism is closely associated with multiculturalism, where various cultures allocate diverse connotations to terminology that might appear common whilst in reality it is not the case. It is only possible for accurate communication to take place when there is a direct exchange between an expression and a notion. Consequently, unambiguous and accurate communication will only take place when the dispatcher and the recipient of a message ascribe the same meaning to the subject (Bekink & Botha, 2007).

Therefore, in South Africa, with its multitude of cultures and languages, it is challenging to ensure that people assign common meanings to certain ideas and concepts across cultural or language barriers. However, this unfortunate situation is not the focus of this study (perhaps it could be a topic for future researchers).

### **2.3.7 South African laws and plain language**

When plain language gained momentum in South Africa, drafters had to reconsider their methods. They thus constructed policies and laws that would result in the desired transformation Dullah Omar was so passionate about.

Below are a number of those laws (Burt, 2009):

- The Access to Information Act
- The Bill of Rights
- The Companies Act
- The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa
- The Consumer Protection Act
- The Long-term Insurance Act

- The National Credit Act
- The Short-term Insurance Act

Accordingly, I will discuss how plain language was implemented in *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* and *The Consumer Protection Act*. As mentioned previously, the CPA contains a clear definition and prescriptions regarding plain language; hence, it is relevant to this discussion. The plain language movement in South Africa took off in 1996 when the Constitution was drafted. Therefore, it too is deemed relevant to this discussion.

#### *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*

At the time the Constitution came into force, the South African government undertook to produce simple and understandable legislation and legal communication. They attempted to embrace plain language in order to ensure that the diverse population of South Africa has access to justice and the law in straightforward and understandable language (Bekink & Botha, 2007).

The government invited an international team of plain language experts, including amongst others Christopher Balmford, Joseph Kimble, Phil Knight and Shadrack Gutto, to South Africa in order to advise the Constitutional Assembly on how to draft the Final Constitution in plain language (Viljoen & Nienaber, 2001).

The Constitutional Assembly comprised 400 people, but they were divided into smaller groups, as such a large group would not have been able to reach consensus on anything. Technical experts made up of academics, lawyers and the like were assigned to each group in order to facilitate the plain language process. Each group drafted their section, and it went through a process of political agreement (Viljoen & Nienaber, 2001).

The delegation of plain language experts made a number of recommendations in order to produce a user-friendly and transparent document that readers can comprehend. The Constitutional Assembly accepted their proposals, and they set out to draft the new Constitution in plain language (Bekink & Botha, 2007).

They advocated for the omission of the word “shall”, and replaced it with “must” (Viljoen & Nienaber, 2001). The drafters of the Constitution resolved to use more general and common terms, for e.g. “every person” was replaced with “everyone”. They used the active voice and constructed short and to-the-point sentences. They avoided needless cross-referencing, applied modern words and provided explanations at the end of the Constitution (Bekink & Botha, 2007).

Drafters carefully planned the structure and layout, and they consecutively allocated the foremost legal stipulations. It is evident that the drafters followed a well thought out process (Bekink &

Botha, 2007). They made every effort to subscribe to legal conditions and to formulate the text in such a manner that a layperson would be able to understand it.

The drafters of the Constitution decided to place essential information at the beginning of sentences and paragraphs and the lesser important information at the end or in schedules. They outlined an orderly table of contents and presented defining words and phrases in italics (Viljoen & Nienaber, 2001).

Find below a comparison done by Viljoen and Nienaber (2001), containing sections from the Interim Constitution and the Final Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. Note the use and subsequent omission of the word “shall”. Additionally, take note of the use of “every person” and “everyone”.

Table 2.2 **Comparison between the Interim Constitution and the Final Constitution**

Interim Constitution (Section 13)	Final Constitution (Section 14)
Every person shall have the right to his or her personal privacy, which shall include the right not to be subject to searches of his or her person, home or property, the seizure of private possessions or the violation of private communications (Viljoen & Nienaber, 2001).	Everyone has the right to privacy, which includes the right not to have – Their person or home searched; Their property searched; Their possessions seized; The privacy of their communications infringed (Viljoen & Nienaber, 2001).

### *The Consumer Protection Act*

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa paved the way for plain language. Hence, consumer protection in South Africa presented a movement for the legislation of plain language, most notably, the Consumer Protection Act 68 of 2008 (CPA) (Cornelius, 2015).

In terms of the CPA, it is compulsory to use plain and understandable language in documentation like contracts and documents that are intended for consumers. The Act therefore requires complicated notions and texts to be written in simple, clear language that is easy to understand (Stroop & Chürr, 2013). The main objective of this Act is that consumers should find the text uncomplicated and easy to navigate.

According to Stroop and Chürr (2013), the CPA includes a comprehensive definition of plain and understandable language. This concerns not only grammar and text but visual and graphic characteristics as well. Burt (2009) appears to agree with their notion that the definition of plain language is found within the CPA.

CPA: Section 22 (2):

For the purposes of this ACT, a notice, document or visual representation is in plain language if it is reasonable to conclude that an ordinary consumer of the class of persons for whom the notice, document or visual representation is intended, with average literacy skills and minimal experience as a consumer of the relevant goods or services, could be expected to understand the content, significance and import of the notice, document or visual representation without undue effort, having regard to-

- a) the context, comprehensiveness and consistency of the notice, document or visual representation;
- b) the organization, form and style of the notice, document or visual representation;
- c) the vocabulary, usage and sentence structure of the notice, document or visual representation; and
- d) the use of any illustrations, examples, headings or other aids to reading and understanding (Burt, 2009)

Burt (2009) sums up the above section in the CPA in two ways. Firstly, it pertains to the fact that consumers should be able to understand the documents they are presented with. Secondly, it offers an account of certain required plain language elements.

Accordingly, Stroop and Chürr (2013) deduce that the term “an ordinary consumer” is a clear guideline that drafters are obliged to make sure that not only those trained for the legal profession can comprehend their texts, but also ordinary people with no legal background. Therefore, a regular person that forms part of the client base of the commercial world should be able to fully understand the meaning and wording of the text.

Cornelius (2015) believes that the provisions of Section 22 (2) of the CPA compel drafters to be mindful of terminology and sentence structure of the text in order to remove any doubt that readers can easily make sense of the documents they produce. She also deduces that the CPA alludes to document design issues regarding readers’ ability to understand a text clearly. It prompts plain language drafters to consider secondary aids in order to guarantee that readers understand the text. The CPA therefore recognises the significance of cohesion in documents (Cornelius, 2015). In addition, the CPA requires that information within consumer documents should be aligned with the linguistic proficiency of the intended target audience (Cornelius, 2015). To write with your audience in mind is a very important document design principle; hence, one can observe the CPA from that viewpoint as well.

### **2.3.8 Concerns/challenges for plain language in South Africa**

Over the last two decades, considerable progress has been made regarding plain language in South Africa. However, challenges remain. Plain language was of no concern to the previous government, but the new government considered the law as the only apparatus with which to promptly redress injustices that took place during our country's oppressive past (Burt, 2009).

The government regarded the frankness of language as a pledge of democracy that should be the starting point to address people's right to information. Furthermore, in order for people to exercise those rights in a democracy, they should be able to fully understand and realise those rights (Viljoen & Nienaber, 2001). Hence, the government emphasised that all forms of communication should be as clear and effective as possible (Bekink & Botha, 2007).

Burt (2009) notes that the international plain language experts that the South African government approached to help draft our new Constitution were very meticulous. Unfortunately, they ignored our complex linguistic background during the drafting process.

In turn, Cornelius (2015) believes that the CPA also disregards the South African linguistic background, as it does not mention how to manage multilingualism and multiculturalism. Stroop and Chürr (2013) argue that the CPA does not require information to be in more than one of the 11 official languages of South Africa. This occurrence implores the idea that it is not possible to achieve plain language if consumers are unable to understand the language contained in a document. In all probability, such persons would need to seek advice from external sources. Consequently, it suggests that their insight – or rather lack thereof – would lead to *undue effort* that ultimately implies that the document is in fact not written in plain language (Stroop & Chürr, 2013). Unfortunately, Stroop and Chürr (2013) do not elaborate on this idea in more detail.

- However, Viljoen and Nienaber (2001) note that it is impossible to translate all official documents into 11 languages. This certainly puts South Africa in a huge predicament. We should thus, address this challenge before it is even possible to attain plain language. Therefore, Viljoen and Nienaber (2001) identified a few barriers that should be overcome in order for South African law to be more accessible and understandable: We should produce terms that are equal in all languages.
- We should change our own intolerant, impatient and arrogant attitudes.
- Difficult legal language and procedures should be made less complicated.
- Legal costs and delays should be addressed.

However, in this study, plain language can, at the very least, help staff members of SU to develop a clearer understanding of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3. Texts should be written in plain



language in order to eliminate instances of legalese and officialese, which make these documents difficult to understand.

Burt (2009) takes issue with the *average literacy* stated in Section 22 (2) of the CPA. She questions if a person who can only communicate in Sesotho will still be deemed of average literacy if the document is only provided in English. As mentioned before, it again becomes clear that in South Africa, plain English does not translate into plain language (Burt 2009). However, for the purpose of this study, it is accepted that all permanent staff members of SU are indeed able to communicate in basic English as they would otherwise not be able to communicate effectively within their work environment.

Cornelius (2015) agrees with the problems of *average literacy* in this regard. She believes it causes confusion as to whose level of literacy is referred to, i.e. be it the literacy level of the specific target audience or the average literacy level of all consumers in South Africa. She goes further by saying that the plain language drafter often estimates the average literacy of a particular target audience because of this confusion (Cornelius 2015).

Stroop and Chürr (2013) observe that it is problematic to determine if provisions of plain language meet the prerequisites of plain language since no guidelines exist in this respect, implying that besides the fact that the CPA contains the definition of plain language, there is no law in SA that regulates its functioning.

Cornelius (2015) agrees with Stroop and Chürr as she feels that the absence of norms and standards, together with insufficient direction to evaluate and assess plain language, pressurises the consumer as well as the language industry. She makes the point that in South Africa it is not presently proven beyond question that we possess plain language proficiency as legislation requires. This leads to situations in which legal professionals fulfil the roles of plain language practitioners (Cornelius, 2015). The question arises if they in fact possess the theoretical knowledge to produce understandable texts. However, it is the norm in many instances that professionals in their respective fields usually create the organisation's documents.

Do plain language practitioners, however, have the necessary knowledge regarding the relevant subject matter? Perhaps if they combine their plain language knowledge with document design, they could ensure a good outcome as it is a premise of document design that the familiar communicative standard of the institution should be upheld in creating documents. Hence, Cornelius (2015) asserts that plain language will only be possible if plain language practitioners are able to merge plain language theory with plain language practice.



In conclusion, let's examine the story of Mr. Mothle and his son-in-law's debt, as relayed by Burt (2009).

Before the current plain language legislation in South Africa, Mr. Mothle signed surety for a debt that his son-in-law incurred years ago. The plaintiff is now suing him directly as his son-in-law cannot pay the debt any longer and have fallen in arrears.

In court, Mr. Mothle raised the argument that the plaintiff should rather sue his son-in-law and attempt to recover the debt from him instead. However, it now emerged that Mr. Mothle relinquished all rights to this justification when he signed the contract. The clause reads as follows: "I renounce all benefits from the exceptions of *excussionis et divisionis, non causa debiti* and *non numeratae pecunia*" (Burt, 2009: 41).

Needless to say, Mr. Mothle was horrified. He attested that he did not read the contract and even if he did, he would not have understood it anyway. The court did not find in Mr. Mothle's favour and contended that he should have made sure he understood what was set out in the contract before he signed it.

Mr. Mothle thus signed a contract that he did not understand. The above clause is written in English but also contains Latin phrases. Besides the fact that Mr. Mothle's home language is not English, he has no knowledge of Latin.

If the contract was written in clear transparent plain language, Mr. Mothle would have stood a much better chance to understand what he signed. It would have been ideal if the contract was written in Mr. Mothle's home language. Perhaps Mr. Mothle's son-in-law would then not have incurred the debt in the first place, because perhaps he too did not fully comprehend the terms and conditions of the loan.

## **2.4 Document design**

According to Schriver (1997), it is astonishing that we know so little regarding document design. Individuals are constantly faced with situations in which they must deal with communication to operate effectively. We find these communications on computer screens, forms, manuals, schedules and the like (Schriver, 1997). In addition, it forms an integral part of individuals' daily lives.

When people find it difficult to derive information from these designs, they feel powerless and frustrated (Schriver, 1997). This notion closely relates to the argument of plain language: the purpose of the information in the text should be clear and obvious to the reader in order for the reader to act accordingly.

The following extract from Benefits Policy (DV0406 3.3.5.a) is a clear example of how readers could be frustrated as they will not be able to immediately derive the information that the text is trying to convey:

Compassionate leave with full pay may be granted for:

- 3 working days a year, and
- another 14 days during every cycle of three years.
- Thus 23 working days' compassionate leave are available during every cycle of three years.

The information that the text is supposed to convey is not clear and obvious to the reader from the onset. Therefore, they could feel confused and powerless, as they will be unsure of how many days of compassionate leave with full pay they are entitled to.

Individuals tend to use goods and services that are clear, apparent and trouble-free. They do not want to consult external sources for assistance (Jansen & Maes, 1999). Hence, writers should apply document design principles in order to alter such instances as it brings art and science together. It integrates written materials in a way that improves peoples' ability to act accordingly in situations where they are required to read (Schrivier, 1997).

Moreover, plain language requires that information in a text is organised and related themes grouped together. Furthermore, the information should be relevant and complete in the sense that it answers all the questions the reader might have in a clear, understandable fashion.

Consumers and civilian factions in countries like the USA and the UK demanded that their governments provide them with documents that are easy to understand. This demand has to some degree advanced the development of document design (Schrivier, 1997). Consumers became aware of their needs as readers. They began to request documents that are easy to understand and are neither pretentious nor ambiguous. In other words, they wanted documents to be in plain language so that the approach and language used in the text speak to their own individual needs.

Together with a range of technological and public realms, they fashioned in the rise of document design and their actions lead to the development of simple and truthful documents (Schrivier, 1997). Evidently, this perception relates to the notion that plain language is a form of comprehensible and useful communication (Kimble, 1996–1997).

The field of document design is developing fast and is becoming more known within the public domain. It collaborates with diverse subject matters that are slightly connected to analyse and implement communication. One can find an increasing body of document design literature in various disciplines (Schrivier, 1997). According to Jansen and Maes (1999), document design corresponds with a present-day vision on language training and text research. It suggests a

relationship between theory and practice as well as a high degree of interdisciplinary connection and public consequence.

Then again, this dispersion of document design studies in various fields leave scholars unable to pursue significant research as it is a challenging task to comprehend the requirements of various disciplines. It begs the question of how novices are expected to take advantage of these considerations if scholars find it difficult to peruse them (Hoeken, Renkema & Spooren, 1999). This argument is the only criticism of document design that I could find during this study.

Hoeken, Renkema and Spooren (1999) observe that a divide exists amid real life occurrences and academic notions. They further state that researchers lose sight of the fact that real people have to use these documents in everyday circumstances (Hoeken, Renkema & Spooren, 1999). This is in contrast to plain language where the writer never loses sight of the reader as it is a premise that the language used in the text speaks to the needs of the reader in a language that the reader will easily understand.

Hoeken, Renkema and Spooren (1999) also state that practitioners design documents as if they are unaware of how people will interact with them. This occurrence could render the whole document design process futile as the success of a text depend on how readers understand it and act thereupon. In the event that readers do not clearly understand the message of the text and if they are unable to act according to the substance of the text, it would mean that the text does not fulfil the conditions of document design principles.

Whereas it used to be the reader's obligation to grasp and make sense of text, the focus has shifted to the needs of the reader. The writer also has to ensure that the reader finds the text easy to read and to understand (De Stadler, Basson & Luttig, 2005). Therefore, Shriver (2010) believes that when writers apply plain language, readers are able to discover, understand and associate the intended information that they derive from the text successfully.

Successful communication no longer requires error-free writing only; the notion is now that documents intended for readers should be produced (Schriver, 1997). The intention of document design is to address the needs of individuals and organisations that comprise the public (Jansen & Maes, 1999). In other words, the average reader should be able to grasp the general idea that the text attempts to convey. What better way to realise that goal than for the text to be written in plain language that directly speaks to the needs and abilities of the average reader? The following extract from Benefits Policy (DV0406 3.3.10.a) is an example of how the writer does not keep the needs of the average reader, and in essence SU employees, in mind:

Employees who can submit (a) medical certificate(s) that SU finds acceptable are entitled to a maximum of eight months' sick leave (taken either continuously or as separate

periods of eight months in total) during every successive period of three years of employment – at full pay for the first four months, thereafter at half the pensionable amount of the relevant employee's COE.

The above-mentioned extract will not achieve its goal, which is to convey the desired message to SU employees, as they will not be able to understand it since it does not speak to their needs and abilities. It is longwinded and ambiguous and the reader will lose track of the message along the way.

The quality of documentation that various sectors in South Africa produce demonstrates that much work still needs to be done in this regard (De Stadler, Basson & Luttig, 2005). Hence, Jansen and Maes (1999) proposes that document design could assist South Africans in overcoming the multitude of communication problems our diverse multicultural society faces. According to Wright (1998), the field of document design is by no means fully developed and document designers do not have all the answers for creating successful documents. However, much progress has been made in this field to obtain a much clearer understanding about the requirements of readers and the many techniques that are available to fulfil these requirements (Wright, 1998).

As mentioned earlier, much work is also needed in order to fully reach the goal of establishing plain language in South Africa. However, if writers combine plain language with document design principles in texts – and more specifically in policy documents at SU – it is possible to enhance the comprehensibility of policy documents at this institution.

#### **2.4.1 Definition of document design**

In Shriver's (1997) view, there is no ideal description for document design. She does, however, depict document design as a subject that relates to drafting documents that assists the mixture of words and design in such a manner that people can achieve their objectives when they use these documents. A document is well designed when people are able to use the content to meet their needs (Shriver, 1997). Moreover, document designers should be able to produce documents that will satisfy the needs of multiple audiences whilst they consider the experience, expertise and ideals of their multiple readers at the same time.

In addition, De Stadler, Basson and Luttig (2005) concur that document design considers the means that are able to convey the accurate message to readers. Moreover, these methods should also ensure that the message has the expected outcome.

Jansen and Maes (1999) distinguish document design as a discipline of concept and exercise with the purpose of producing useful, convincing text that readers can easily understand. Again,

this relates to plain language, since it also endeavours to be a form of clear and concise communication.

Hoeken, Renkema and Spooren (1999) describe document design as writing that merges written, verbal and visual dialogue with text characteristics, including meaning, institutional situation and background.

Lentz and Pander Maat (2004) contend that document design is challenging in view of the fact that it is a very complex process that combines the varied goals of the text with the varied readers. At the same time, document designers have to combine the goals of the document with financial and legal considerations.

It is thus apparent that the field of document design comprises an amalgamation of numerous elements of which the main objective should always be the reader. Documents should be made as easy and user-friendly as possible in order for the reader to operate effectively after they internalised the text. When the reader understands how to proceed after they have read the document, then the document designer would have succeeded in their task (Jansen & Maes, 1999). In other words, if the writer creates the text in plain language and use document design principles, the text's meaning should be clear. Readers should be able to understand the message of the text in no uncertain terms.

#### **2.4.2 Document design in the organisational setting**

Since the 1980s, the focus on reading and writing studies has shifted from an academic to business and organisational settings. Educators of these subjects realised that students needed to be prepared to design documents in collaboration with various associates and professionals inside organisations (Janssen & Neutelings, 2001).

Documents fulfil diverse roles within an organisation. It is used to distribute information; to instruct, manage, persuade and motivate people; to formulate policies; and to advertise certain products and services. Therefore, it is imperative that document designers carefully consider readers' expectations amid the function, content, structure and style of the document type (De Stadler, Basson & Luttig, 2005).

The goal of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 is also to instruct, inform and motivate SU employees regarding the terms of different kinds of leave at the University. Therefore, it is important that writers of this document carefully consider the needs of the reader in order to attain the desired actions. However, if writers do not pay attention to the content, structure and style of the document and they do not transmit the message in a clear and obvious fashion, SU employees will not be informed and they will be even less motivated. The following sentence is an example

of such an instance (DV0406 3.3.a): “Should the employee progress satisfactorily, the study opportunity will not be deducted from his or her annual or accumulated leave.” The content is not self-explanatory and the employee will be confused regarding when to apply for a study opportunity since it is not explicitly stated. The employee will be left to wonder if they should apply after the fact, as the sentence states that only *after* satisfactory progress will it *not* come off their annual leave. So, does the employee first apply for annual leave before the study opportunity is granted? It is not clear from the text; hence it will lead to misunderstandings.

De Stadler, Basson and Luttig, (2005: 14-15) also demonstrate how important it is that the writer should address the needs of the reader in the following extract: A municipality sent a communication to residents regarding water restrictions. The purpose of this notification is to motivate residents to comply with these restrictions. However, the notification points to the difficulty firefighters would encounter due to the loss of water.

The writer of this notification should have focused on how a water shortage would have an impact on the daily activities of the affected residents. Instead, they are placing the focus on fire fighting. Residents who have never experienced a fire will not identify with this, whereas they would have identified with the message if the notice highlighted how a water shortage would directly impact their daily lives.

The writers of the above notification clearly did not address the needs of the reader. If they had done so, they would have created a notice to communicate with the intended readers, i.e. the residents, and not the firefighters (De Stadler, Basson & Luttig, 2005). One can also deduce that the document did not succeed in its goal of motivating people not to waste water. The majority of residents are not firefighters and it will be very difficult for them to perceive themselves in that role. However, they are residents of that area and therefore the text would have been more successful if it spoke to their identities as residents.

Many instructional documents are difficult to comprehend as it is often filled with technical jargon. Furthermore, sentences are too long and complex (Jansen & Maes, 1999). This can be ascribed to the fact that document designers are expected to adhere to the established communicative standards of the particular organisation (Orlikowski & Yates, 1994). This is often seen during the writing process of policy documents as writers adhere to the communicative protocol of their organisation. In addition, they portray the image of the organisation.

Schriver (1993) advises that organisations should be cautious not to restrain writers and designers too much as it may restrict their creativity, which in turn could affect the quality of the documents they produce.

However, she points to the fact that document designers are more often than not wedged between the reader and the organisation on whose behalf they produce documents (Schrive, 1997). They have to plot a course between the requirements of bureaucrats as well as readers. Document designers are required to write documents that consider the viewpoints of readers, whilst the text simultaneously portrays the values and identity of the organisation (Schrive, 1997). This is not always an easy task and requires careful planning on the part of the document designer.

On the other hand, an objective of plain language is to enhance the comprehensibility of the text and to render it as clear and as simple as possible in order for the reader to encounter as little as possible misunderstandings and uncertainty. It does away with the formal, over-the-top language organisations ascribe to whilst the text still gets the message across in a clear and transparent manner.

Hoeken, Renkema and Spooren (1999) maintain that organisations incur huge losses due to documents that are badly designed. In many cases, these organisations are perceived as incompetent and their reputation is destroyed. This can be prevented by designing documents that consider the intent of the organisation as well as the consumers' needs (Hoeken, Renkema & Spooren, 1999). Should organisations be capable of clearly defining their challenges in a language that researchers understand, they will come a lot closer to solving their communication problems (Hoeken, Renkema & Spooren, 1999).

De Stadler (2005) points out that expense is not always calculated in monetary terms, hence institutions should take heed of the abstract price tag as well. These expenses are usually less concrete and include aspects such as a negative image and problematic interpersonal relationships (De Stadler, 2005). Poorly written and designed documents could lead to a negative image of an institution, which in turn means that a great deal of time, effort and money have to be spent in order to restore that image (De Stadler, 2005). The added cost of restoring relationships scarred by badly designed documents should also be borne in mind by organisations (De Stadler, 2005).

De Stadler presents the following case study:

An organisation created a document about its *Performance Improvement Program*<sup>3</sup> (De Stadler, 2005: 12).

- **Topic** – The topic of this document contains the very controversial and sensitive issue of performance, performance assessment and performance improvement.

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<sup>3</sup> Annexure A



- **Target audience** – The intended audience of the text is unclear. The text was meant for managers, which proved to be problematic as the text was sent to all staff (even though it focuses on managers and instructs them on their role in this process).
- **Goals of the document** – The document had several goals according to the communications division of the organisation. These included:
  - To *inform* staff of the program's existence.
  - To *instruct* them of its workings.
  - To *persuade* them to regard it in a positive light.
  - The *emotional* goal was to reassure them not to be intimidated by the program.

Conversely, the text does not clearly define these goals. The goals that the text intended and goals derived from the text are in conflict with one another. The informative and instructional goals are quite clear. On the other hand, the text does not seem to realise its persuasive and emotional goals.

- **Context/circumstances** – The proposed document is the only draft that was sent to staff. This was done during a time when there indeed existed insecurity amongst staff about policies and administration.
- **Contents** – The organisation of the following information is complicated:
  - What exactly does the program announce? The methods of its implementation are vague.
  - The program is not placed within the larger policy framework or context of the organisation.
  - The end goal of the program is confusing and unclear.
  - Instructions on how to implement the program are not clearly defined.
  - The content does not answer very important questions like what is on offer, by who and when.
- **External structure/layout** – The document appears very bureaucratic, unsympathetic and alienating (Appendix A).
- **Style** – De Stadler (2005) mentions the following points regarding the style of the document:
  - The passive voice creates distance between the sender and receiver.



- The text does not speak to the reader directly; hence it will be difficult to persuade the reader to act in a favoured manner.
  - The text refers to the reader in the third person thus, the text is not reader-focused.
  - The text isolates the reader with its bureaucratic style.
  - The text uses inappropriate words that do not act to alleviate the distress it causes the reader.
- **Cost of the text** – According to the study performed by De Stadler (2005) on this text, there are high costs associated with this document.
    - The organisation lost approximately three-hundred-and-fifty-thousand rand (R350 000). This was due to numerous meetings, phone calls and the like that followed after this document was distributed. The production cost of the document is, however, not included in that calculation.
    - The intangible cost of this document is rather difficult to calculate. During the focus group discussion, participants noted that the document had financial as well as emotional impacts on them. The organisation lost face. The morale was low amongst staff members. Fear was at the order of the day and tension was high.

### 2.4.3 Recommendations for effective document design

Document design aims to meet the communicative needs of individuals and organisations. According to Spooren and Renkema (1999), the writer's objective is the most crucial attribute to text types, which is to say that the writer wants to inform or instruct the reader.

It is a characteristic of document design to create text with the reader in mind. The reader is a functional member of the writing process and should be regarded as such. The writer should structure the text from the reader's point of view. They should motivate and support the reader's reasons for reading the document in the first place, whilst they draw attention to the subject matter (Schraver, 1997).

De Stadler et al. (2005) present the following **guidelines for effective document design**:

- **Define goals** – Document designers should **consider** what **the goal of the document** is even before they start the design process. This will enhance the reader's ability to understand the content.
- **Reach goals** – Do not forget the focus of the document. **Keep the reader in mind.** Writers will not meet the goal of the document if they do not persuade the reader.

- **Address the needs of the reader** – Communicate with the intended readers and speak to their profile or identity. Do not **communicate in general**.
- **Send a coherent message with a clear theme** – Aid the reader to understand the core message of the document. **Focus on the main message** throughout. Plan extensively prior to the writing process.
- **Ensure a clear structure** – **Anticipate readers' questions** and structure the answers in a logical order. The document will then be easier to read. The logical order will also aid the writing process, as its structure can serve as a text schema.
- **Create a suitable style** – Writers need to know their audience in order to write in a **style that would suit their particular audience**. Writers should consider the goal of the document when they decide on which style to use.
- **Create a suitable look and feel** – **Take heed of the non-verbal elements** such as graphics and layout of the content. Be creative and do not use unmotivated features that negatively influence the look and feel of the document.
- **Balance the needs of the reader and the organisation** – **Be mindful of the various audiences** of the document, including primary and secondary audiences as well as the organisation that commissioned the document in the first place.

Renkema (1999) as well as Hoeken, Renkema and Spooren (1999) identify what they call the seven sins of document design research. They elaborate on how these transgressions often make document design practitioners fail.

1. **Neglecting the real problem** – Language use can cause a document to fail. The miscommunication in the *Performance Improvement Program*, relayed above, seems to be the result of the incorrect text type that the writer used. The writer also lost sight of the different needs that the different readers from a varied target group may have. For example, the organisation sent a brochure to all its employees regarding early retirement. However, they did not take the different ages of the employees into account, thus they did not address the needs of both the young employees and the older employees who are closer to retirement. The younger employees would require a lot less information than the older ones. This failure is a clear example that the writer does not know their audience or did not write the text with the reader in mind.
2. **Separating theory-bound and problem-driven research** – document design should integrate theory-bound and problem-driven approaches. It is often difficult to decide what type of discourse occurrences should be measured in order to analyse the quality of a

document. A problem-driven study that is based on a particular document in a particular context can enhance theoretical knowledge. If the theoretical framework is more tangible, organisations can better assess if the results of a particular study on a particular document will be relevant or helpful to their context or not. Usually organisations focus on improving their documents. However, they are unsure of what to do to the document in order to improve it. If they clearly focused on *what* to do to the document and *how* to do it, it is possible to integrate theory and the problem. For example, this study explores the potential difficulties that Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 pose to staff members. Therefore, I will conduct individual in-depth interviews with the target audience in order to ascertain what exactly they find problematic in the document. The University could thus derive from that feedback what they can change about the document and they can get a clear understanding of how they can go about doing so.

3. **Disregarding the document's institutional context** – Practitioners often reject the suggestions of experts because these suggestions differ from the organisation's usual communication practice. In order to improve a document, it is imperative that the writer knows the institutional context of the document. The writer should take the background of the organisation into account. Additionally, it is very important that the writer uses the accurate technical terms and apply the relevant language use. Renkema (1999) relayed a translation study where he and his team decided not to deviate from the traditional "Lord" when they referred to God. They did this because most people familiar with the Bible are comfortable and accustomed to the term.
4. **Applying discourse concepts imprecisely** – It is difficult to assess the quality of a document without a clear definition of quality. In the absence of clear guidelines, Renkema (1999) chose the image of the sender in his study about the quality of letters sent to taxpayers. For example, if the image of the organisation is good after people read its document, then the quality of a document can be deemed just as good. However, the quality of the document will be deemed to be even better if the image of the organisation is improved after people read the text.
5. **Doing research in the laboratory to solve problems in the field** – Provide united evidence through for example experimental, research, field testing, desk analysis and corpus analysis approaches. Document designers cannot solve practical problems if they do not test their documents in real world situations. In this study, I will test my redesigned document during focus group discussions where participants will answer questions and discuss the document.

6. **Selective use of material** – Researchers should become more aware of their techniques and operations. For instance, when researchers assess anecdotal evidence versus statistical evidence, questions like the following arise: What is included in anecdotal evidence? How much does statistical evidence add up to? Renkema (1999) suggests that the document designer should ensure that text manipulations seem natural.
7. **Presenting results without consequences** – It is important that document design academics are precise about the theoretical results of their findings and about the implementation thereof. It is difficult to convince organisations of the benefits of document design findings. Inside organisations, managers and the like are more interested in implementing findings whereas academics solve theoretical problems.

These recommendations for creating better documents could thus be applied in this study. Considering what I will gather from the interviews, I will attempt to create a new policy document that could be a significant improvement on the current comprehensibility and clarity of Benefits Policy DV0604 3.3. I will thus apply the following properties when I rewrite Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3.

- It is important to always remember that the goal is to convey the relevant information in a clear understandable way.
- Directly address the needs of the employees in order to communicate the message.
- Accommodate the individuality, different educational levels and reading skills of employees. However, the most important factor is to balance the needs of the University and the needs of the employees.
- Speak to the varied audience, which includes professional, administrative and technical employees.
- Always keep the importance of SU's identity as well as its conventional communicative methods in mind.

#### **2.4.4 Document quality**

Wright (1998) maintains that no clear rules and regulations exist in document design. She believes that document designers should realise when specific strategies will enhance the readability of a document and when it would not be the case.

Document designers should be able to visualise their reader and the reader's background in order to apply certain themes in specific situations (Wright, 1998). Wright argues that document designers should find practical compromises to solve problems, such as keeping the needs of the

reader in mind. Additionally, they should not stray from the accepted and established communication methods of the organisation (Wright 1998).

According to Schriver (1993), writers' and designers' notions of quality documents and the principles against which organisations often review it, differ. Organisations and government set the measure for document design at how swiftly writers can complete documents and the minimal expenses they incur (Schriver, 1993). It is thus clear that organisations should spend more time to consider the manner in which it communicates in order to lower the costs, which are not only monetary, resulting from badly designed documents.

Hoeken, Renkema and Spooren (1999) profess that researchers and practitioners should combine their respective knowledge to enhance the success of document design. They maintain that practitioners have a wealth of experience in using textual elements that are effective for certain readers. On the other hand, researchers know the ways in which readers process documents and the mechanisms that influence their processing (Hoeken, Renkema & Spooren, 1999).

According to De Jong and Schellens (in De Stadler 2005), there are many methods, such as text-focused, expert-focused and reader-focused methods, with which to assess the quality of documents. He distinguishes the following categories: check-lists, focus groups and the plus-minus method. He does, however, take into account that researchers often apply these methods in controlled academic research environments, meaning that they do not encounter the normal limitations that exist in the real world (De Stadler, 2005). However, I will interview a target audience of SU's staff members to determine the quality of Benefits Policy (DV 0406 3.3) within the real world, i.e. the respective working environments of staff members within SU as an organisation.

I will discuss De Stadler's (2005) illustration of this notion very briefly as I relay the findings of his investigation into the quality of learning materials of a South African Training Authority. De Stadler's team combined their respective knowledge from various subject matters and then decided on a reader-focused assessment of the materials and focus groups as a method for obtaining quick and direct results. De Stadler and his team created a set of questions to facilitate discussion amongst the groups of students and teachers.

The group of teachers comprised different cultures and people from varied backgrounds. The discussion amongst them was very successful, thus De Stadler and his team collected valuable information.

The group of students mainly comprised a collectivistic (African) background. However, it proved very difficult to get them to participate in the discussion. The cultural barriers amongst

them caused many obstacles that hindered communication within their group. De Stadler and his team had to make a few concessions in order to get these student groups to open up (De Stadler, 2005).

De Stadler concludes that when we apply these methods that were developed in an academic mono-cultural setting, we encounter problems caused by the divide between theory and practice. A lot of research has to be done on the application of these quality testing methods, particularly in a multicultural setting (De Stadler, 2005).

In addition, Schriver (1993) investigated document design practices in the United States and Japan, and she revealed that practitioners in these countries were confronted with considerable challenges when aspiring to produce quality documents. She conducted interviews with an American writer who works for a medium-sized organisation and a Japanese writer from a large organisation.

Here are the findings of those interviews (Shriver, 1993: 240).

Table 2.3 Comparison between an American and a Japanese document designer

Excerpt from an interview with an American document designer	Excerpt from an interview with a Japanese document designer
<p><i>Interviewer:</i> Before designing a document for clients, do you inform them regarding the various choices they have pertaining to the document?</p> <p><i>Writer:</i> Yes, I explain the quality of a document using a metaphor that they can get a Chevy or a Mercedes.</p> <p><i>Interviewer:</i> What are their reactions to this figure of speech?</p> <p><i>Writer:</i> The majority of them want a Mercedes, at the cost of a Chevy.</p> <p><i>Interviewer:</i> What does your boss want?</p> <p><i>Writer:</i> He would also choose the Mercedes. However, in the two years that I've been working here I only made Chevys. The standard of some was on the level of Pintos. Documents of the lowest quality.</p>	<p><i>Interviewer:</i> Does your boss attribute the same meaning of quality as you do?</p> <p><i>Writer:</i> No, in my opinion a quality document should be impressive. My company should be proud to be associated with it. My boss thinks quality depends on how swiftly a document is produced. As well as incurring the minimal cost in the process.</p> <p><i>Interviewer:</i> Are you or your co-workers allowed to sign your names on the documents you produce?</p> <p><i>Writer:</i> No, never, and I'm actually glad as I am not proud of the work I produce. I can do a lot better, if I am afforded the time to produce a document to be proud of. After three years of working here, I have not produced a single manual for a portfolio to look for a new job. Many of my peers feel the same.</p>

It is apparent from these interviews that document designers and organisations often have different interpretations of what a quality document is. It is worth noting that both interviewees describe a quality document as a document that meets the needs of the reader. What is also evident, is that both of them seem to prefer to produce documents that are of a higher quality than what is presently the case (Schrivers, 1993).

It thus implies that the needs of the reader are just as important as the needs of the organisation. Organisations do not evaluate the success of a document by how its readers understand it. Instead, they focus on how swiftly writers can produce documents. Therefore, organisations need to think differently in this regard. Though one might not be able to change the perception of all organisations, this study could go a long way in showing SU, or Human Resources (HR) in particular, that it will be in their best interest to produce clear and understandable documentation. HR could benefit immensely as they will save time since requests for explanations and motivations would decline. Staff members will be able to make sense of documents all on their own.

If SU or in particular HR combine the knowledge of researchers with the expertise of document design practitioners, they can enhance the success of their documents tremendously.

## **2.5 Critical discourse analysis (CDA)**

Fairclough (2015) observes that people frequently misunderstand the term *critical* in CDA because of the unfavourable connotations they attach to it. Scollon (2001) describes CDA as a series of social studies that critically investigate communication. According to him, it explores the use of language as a tool for focusing on a variety of societal dilemmas.

Wodak (2009) concurs that CDA scrutinises the imbalance and inconsistency of communicative characteristics that exist in society. It often identifies the conversational methods that those in power use in order to alleviate or even deepen the existing inequality (Wodak, 2009).

According to Wodak (2001), CDA considers language as a communal exercise and deem the context of its exercise to be fundamental, whilst it focuses on the relationship between language and power. Hence, Scollon is of the view that communication represents social problems; therefore, if one analyses discourse one will move closer to the root of social problems (Scollon, 2001). In other words, if one examines an organisation's discourse or lingua franca, one will be much closer to uncovering the dilemmas that its members may encounter.

Fairclough (2015) notes that the social conditions of people determine how they communicate. People ascribe meanings to texts according to certain communicative standards that they identify with and they use language according to the norms of society. The connotations and associations



to language use differ from organisation to organisation as each infers its own meaning to their respective communicative techniques. Each time individuals converse, listen, write or read, they act in a socially established manner and their actions result in common outcomes (Fairclough, 2015). Individuals would rather be seen to be adhering to the status quo than to disturb the conventional concord that exists within associations or groups.

Hence, Fairclough's (2015) viewpoint is that group members construct meaning according to their respective surroundings as communication entails collective environments. He believes that language is a function of society; therefore, an integral relationship exists between the two. He deems language as an agent of changing social relationships, a form of social practice as well as a social process in itself (Fairclough, 2015).

It is thus plausible that the objective of discourse analysis does not merely focus on communication in isolation. It examines the affiliation between communicative and non-communicative details shared within a collective (Fairclough, 2015). This implies that CDA is used to explore that which is said, the manner in which it is said and also the underlying or oblique subject that the text does not state explicitly. However, it has become the accepted norm for certain groups.

Taylor (2004) examined three key extracts from policy documents related to *Education Queensland's 2010 Strategy*. This program was created in 2000, and its aim was to restructure state education. This examination of Taylor is to briefly illustrate the possible uses of CDA for policy documents.

For purpose of this study, I will only discuss one of those extracts, namely *Destination 2010 – the action plan to implement QSE 2010 (QSE 2010)*. This text is aimed at Education Queensland teachers and administrators. It clearly represents the policy genre and contains specific objectives and guidelines (Taylor, 2004). In other words, the text is a clear example of a typical policy document that is written in formal language according to the writing style that the organisation or the education department in this instance normally use. The text motivates its readers to act as a collective with the use of pleasant language. This perception relates closely to that of Codd (1988) who claims that when organisations produce policy documents, they draw on language in an agreeable approach in order to suggest a cooperative end result by its members; hence, to guide members to follow its preferred process.

Through her analysis of the document, Taylor comes across implied criticism that is directed towards current teachers and the system. She notes that the questions in the text appear to focus on teachers: "*Is what I'm doing promoting the best interests of students?*" (Taylor, 2004: 442). But it is in fact a strategy to influence readers to take up the ideas (discourses) that the text



propagates (Taylor, 2004). Hence, this could signify that the teachers are in fact not doing enough to promote the best interests of the students. However, with the use of the current sentence structure, the meaning is only implied. Or it can be seen as something that could be derived between the lines as the text never explicitly states that particular notion. It could be seen that the reader came to a certain conclusion all by themselves and that it was never the intention of the writer to transfer that particular meaning. The sentence is thus loaded with obscure language use and readers can understand it in more than one way. It is exactly instances like these where I will employ CDA to explore the meanings of certain expressions in Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3.

This implied criticism is in stark contrast to the inference by Codd in “The Curriculum Review”, where no negativity appeared in the text. On the contrary, it was overfilled with harmony and ideology whilst it links up with Codd’s (1998) ideological view in its vision statement that suggests inclusivity of everyone with the use of pleasant and agreeable language.

However, Taylor’s discussion of the appearance and style of the document is the only demonstration of how language is applied in the text. She also mentions the use of bullets, arrows and a jigsaw puzzle. This application of semiotics and language use clearly relates to her notion of inter-discursive analysis, which intercedes the internal relations of the text (semiotic/linguistic aspects) and the external relations of the text (Taylor, 2004). In other words, she does not draw on the linguistic and semiotic choices the writer made in her analysis of this policy document so as to uncover its underlying meanings. She also does not examine the organisation of the text, the grammar and semantics, vocabulary and metaphors or the manner in which it is employed.

She states that CDA intends to portray the association of semiotic and linguistic properties in a text. I anticipated a more detailed analysis in this regard. However, I will subsequently uncover how the target audience perceive this language use and semiotics during the interviews. Together with the consequent analysis of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 it will thus become clearer.

## **2.6 Methodology and objective of CDA**

Fairclough (2012) describes his methodology within CDA as a union with different disciplines and presumptions that concentrates on present-day development of public change. Therefore, it proves useful to join forces with document design and plain language as the objective of plain language is to uncover the ambiguities and errors that traditional styles tend to hide (Kimble, 1996–1997).

Wodak and Meyer (2009) agree with this notion that CDA cannot be defined by a single pragmatic method, since it is made up of different methods that speak to the particular research study at hand. They briefly propose a number of approaches from the perspectives of various scholars that one can apply in particular research settings when CDA is used (Wodak & Meyer, 2009):

- **The discourse historical approach (DHA)** – this approach connects fields of action, genres, discourses and texts (Girnth, 1996 in Wodak & Meyer 2009: 26). It supports critical theories and recognises background. It identifies the specific subjects of a certain discourse and investigates conversational procedures. Then it examines language methods and the specific background or situation.
- **The corpus linguistic approach (CLA)** – Gerlinde Mautner believes that CDA offers added linguistic strategies for systematic scrutiny. One can apply it against the background of CDA approaches. This approach entails the use of computer software in order to analyse authentic and large volumes of textual data.
- **The social actors approach (SAA)** – Theo van Leeuwen concentrates on sociological and linguistic theories that clarify what people do to determine shared structure. Within this method it is important to determine how people form and duplicate their shared social organisation. Therefore, people should understand texts as demonstrations of social practice because collective customs and norms ultimately shape dialogues.
- **The dialectical-relational approach (DRA)** – Norman Fairclough concentrates on social conflict and tries to detect its linguistic communicative expressions in authority, diversity and conflict. According to this approach, every shared custom or tradition signifies certain meanings and social relations. It also reasons that social identities, cultural values, awareness and signs of meaning unite human interaction.

Fairclough maintains that the purpose of CDA is to explain common changes in communicative and non-communicative components, the manner in which it occurs, the connection between changes in communicative and non-communicative components, as well as its limitations (Fairclough, 2012).

The authoritative party is influential when the most suitable wording of text is decided upon whilst all other parties are situated according to a predetermined location within the social order (Fairclough, 2015). Therefore, policy writers are usually at the top of the command chain – they are usually the ones who decide how to apply language in policy documents with no input from those lower down in the hierarchy.

Hence, CDA is applied to investigate content as it explores approaches that attempt to disguise social power relations. It looks, for instance, where powerful groups, such as the decision-makers in organisations, are made to appear discreet within the text (Van Dijk, 1993). According to Wodak (2001), power is often visible in the chain of command within organisations. All other parties are situated according to a predetermined location within the social order (Fairclough, 2015), whilst the dominant party directs them to act in a certain preferred manner. CDA thus examines the manner in which communication create social control, i.e. the manipulation of one group by another (Wodak, 2009).

When language is seen as dialogue and as a common custom, the role of CDA is not just to examine development and understanding but also to examine the relationship between content development and their shared circumstances. Therefore, one should take the direct setting as well as the distant institutional societal arrangement into account (Fairclough, 2015). Thus, this study will take the situation of the staff member in their working environment into account as well as their connection to the broader SU community.

Power relations in specific organisations as well as in society often influence orders of communication and the beliefs of what they represent (Fairclough, 2015). Significant to this perception is that authority figures can play a huge role regarding the influence they exert on the public about certain viewpoints. Therefore, this study will focus on the policy makers, i.e. management of the University who determines its language use and who ultimately plays a role in how others – and more specifically staff members – see it.

Foucault (1982) indicates that this form of influence is engrained in peoples' daily lives – it classifies people, presumes a decree of reality on them and it degrades individuals to mere subjects. People begin to regard themselves as members of a group who is supposed to follow the expected customary behaviour of the group. They conform to the conventions of the group and do not ask questions, as it has now become part of their own value system. They do not even realise that their association(s) influence their perceptions and values.

Therefore, CDA is necessary to enable us to verbalise social interaction clearly and logically to those who have little or no access to the influential few who makes the decisions (Wodak, 1999).

CDA endeavours to disclose that which is hidden. In particular, it reveals the hidden affiliation that takes place in between communication, authority and beliefs. In this study, I will employ CDA to read between the lines of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3. I will draw on it to attempt to discover the reasons for writers' language choices. I will try to uncover the implied meanings as well as the meanings that staff members derive from the text as CDA challenges superficial values and does not take anything at face value (Wodak, 2009).

According to Luke (2002), CDA is a field that intends to unsettle and detach conventional beliefs, daily communication, as well as communication principles that powerful groups hold. CDA campaigns in favour of groups who are treated unfairly within society (Meyer, 2001).

## **2.7 CDA and organisations**

Communication theorists only recently started to consider organisations. Previously, they did not pay much attention to communication theorists (Iedema & Wodak, 1999); however, since communication is positioned in a particular manner and the beliefs which they represent are determined by relationships of power, that situation is due to change (Fairclough, 2015).

Van Dijk (1993) highlights the existence of ranking orders concerning authority within organisations. Inferior group members frequently justify and overlook this occurrence and readily accept this state of affairs as “how it has always been” or as that “it is in the best interests of everyone” (Van Dijk, 1993).

However, CDA makes it possible to ask questions like: Is it really in the group members’ best interest that organisations subject them in the manner that they do? Or to what extent are the ideologies of the organisation synchronised with the individuals’ own personal beliefs and values? With the use of CDA, it is possible to scrutinise demands from higher authorities and piece together the possibility of resistance (Wodak, 2001).

Organisations usually establish and maintain its power through the use of the organisation’s communication, associations and image. Therefore, organisational discourse analysis examines the manner in which one can understand, achieve and challenge objectivity. In addition, it examines the level of authority, the manner in which it is justified or outlawed, and its consequences for interaction (Iedema & Wodak, 1999).

Van Dijk (1993: 255) makes the point that power and dominance are more often than not organised and institutionalised. People perceive and repeat it daily through text and conversation in such a manner that it seems ordinary and conventional. Organisations sanction power strategically in order to persuade inferior groups to act in the interest of the powerful, or, in this case, the organisation (Van Dijk, 1993).

Organisations employ certain rules, regulations and policies that guide its administration and management. It is generally accepted that without these guidelines and policies, the organisation cannot effectively maintain and sustain its operations. We can see a clear example in Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3. The text implies certain negative consequences if the employee does not comply with the resolve of the University in specific instances. Hence, SU persuades its workforce to act in the interest of the University.

Often one observes these instances of power relations in policy documents. These interactions often depicts the world according to the organisation's viewpoint. This is because policy writers, who normally consist of management, are inclined to uphold and reproduce the recognised communicative standards of the organisation. They draw on language in such a manner to attain a biased goal and create particular meanings and signs that obscure collective conflict and promote allegiance to a universal communal advantage (Codd, 1988).

Affiliates of the same group usually ascribe to similar interpretations of their surroundings, which in turn means that these interpretations comprise a central part of an individual's social identity (Meyer, 2001). Organisations thus make the most of these norms and values that sustain their group members for the reason that these group members have to identify with those norms and values. Therefore, it seems natural to influence them to act in a certain manner.

It can also be said that those lower down or at the bottom of the command chain within organisations generally accept these occurrences as the norm because they unhesitatingly understand that they have no right to be heard. They thus voluntarily accept the decisions that management make or they remain silent regarding those decisions, and in doing so, they imply acceptance.

## 2.8 Criticism of CDA

CDA has been criticised for being vague and for not supporting a precise social theory, with the result that it forms no real hypothesis and method (Slembrouck, 2001). Slembrouck (2001) is of the opinion that CDA merely assumes how actual participants are likely to interpret texts and exchanges.

Verschueren (2001) believes that textual analysis rarely justifies the assumptions of CDA and that texts are basically just transporters of what is already assumed to be the case. This author refers to an example from a report in the *Lancaster Guardian* (12 September 1986) that Fairclough (1989: 50-2,124) also commented on in order to illustrate the great methodological weakness of CDA (Verschueren, 2001: 70):

### *Quarry load shedding problem*

Unsheeted lorries from Middlebarrow Quarry were still causing problems by shedding stones on their journey through Warton village, members of the parish council heard at their September meeting.

The council's observations have been sent to the quarry management and members are hoping to see an improvement.

According to Verschueren (2001), the above passage is not ambiguous at all. He believes that the reader will be able to realise that previous articles already provided information about the same subject. Previous articles should thus provide them with perspective. Therefore, it is not the goal to hide that the quarry management is the cause of the problem. According to him, the text clearly outlines that the council is accountable, and the reader should recognise the indirect language use in the text as the regular manner in which the council communicates (Verschueren, 2001). Verschueren further states that the reader should be able to infer from the title what the subject of the text is. Therefore, it is not necessary for the writer to elaborate or even relevant that the reader should clearly grasp who is responsible for what (Verschueren, 2001).

There is a clear link between the quarry and those in charge of the quarry. Therefore, Verschueren (2001) believes that the reader will be able to deduce that those responsible for the load shedding problem are those in charge of the quarry. Thus, no power relations are hidden at any stage; the meaning is very clear and apparent (Verschueren, 2001). With this belief, he places the responsibility on the reader to make sense of the text and to figure out its meaning.

Fairclough's (1989) opinion, on the other hand, contrasts with that of Verschueren. He deduces that the newspaper aids the quarry management to evade responsibility because it does not explicitly state that the quarry management is responsible for the problem. In addition, Fairclough (1989) dispels Verschueren's (2001) notion that the problem is clearly set out in the title of the article. He points out that the title does not indicate at all who or what is shedding loads; hence, the cause of the problem remains unknown. He is thus convinced that the vagueness in the text is a method that the powerful applies in order to disguise their undesirable actions as well as the power that they hold (Fairclough, 1989).

Clear and simple text is an all-important aspect of this study; therefore, it is not possible for me to agree with Verschueren. Document design as well as plain language point out that the onus should never be on the reader to try and figure out the meaning of a text. The writer should always ensure that they meet the needs of the reader. Additionally, the writer should guarantee that the text is easy to read and that it is user-friendly. The reader should also be able to understand the text clearly.

Therefore, I agree with Fairclough's (1989) notion that the writer should identify the cause of the problem clearly in the text. Furthermore, it is important that the text do not serve the interest of a select powerful few. By doing so, the text will be much more transparent.

## **2.9 Summary**

Readers often find policy documents complicated and difficult to understand. This is commonly as a result of language use and the fact that power, coercion and ambiguity are abundant in policy documents. It has therefore become necessary to investigate practices in order to eliminate these elements of ambiguity.

In view of the University's status as an organisation that it operates as such, inferences are made from the policy documents of organisations as well as governments as they, too, operate as organisations.

With the increasing importance of language, there have been efforts to shape it and control it in order to realise objectives of the organisation (Taylor, 2004). Organisations use language through their documentation, including policy documents, to meet their own goals. The least that could be done is to enhance readability by writing these documents in clear and concise terms.

According to Schriver (1993), managers in organisations often wonder what outlook an expert document designer might offer that other specialists do not. They also want to know to what extent the documents that experts design, are better than those of novices (Schriver, 1993).

However, the most pertinent issue that managers pose is how cost effective expert document designers are (Schriver, 1993). Conversely, I previously discussed this notion by De Stadler (2005), who pointed out the non-tangible expenses organisations incur through badly designed documents.

To put it into perspective: organisations could avoid significant expenditure if they utilise document designers. These practitioners could enhance the image of the organisation by constructing effective communication and interaction and creating clear, concise documents, including policy documents in plain language that leaves no room for ambiguity. However, to illustrate how effective documents can save SU time and ultimately money is not the aim of this study.

Schriver (1993) proclaims that in order to convince managers of organisations of the benefits of hiring professional document designers, more practical analyses within the field is necessary in order to answer their questions and lay their issues to bed.

In conclusion, Lentz and Pander Maat (2004) assert that the goal of documents is to constantly attain various goals all at once. These goals are usually related to one another. The text addresses numerous audiences all at the same time, albeit for diverse reasons. Occasionally, this divergence may seem conflicting or even impossible; however, a combination of plain language together with document design principles might prove that it can in fact be attained.

Therefore, proficiency in document design could signify competence to manage these constraints (Lentz & Pander Maat, 2004). Added to that is that the simplicity and clarity of writing in plain language could reduce any fuzziness that might occur in documents, particularly in Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3.

During the individual interviews, I will hopefully discover precisely what staff members find problematic in the above-mentioned policy document. Then I will draw on CDA in order to determine the existing power relations in the text. Additionally, I will use plain language and document design principles in order to create a clear and understandable document.

I will discuss this detail in the following chapter.



### **3 CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The aim of this study was to improve or eliminate any ambiguities that might appear in Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 of SU. In order to reach this goal, I had to firstly determine the needs of the readers of this policy document or in essence the needs of SU employees.

In order to invite a random selection of staff members to participate in the individual interviews I distributed flyers around campus and in online bulletins as I was not allowed by the ethics policy of SU to approach interview participants directly. Walliman (2011) believes that one should choose research participants randomly so as to gain the most reliable representation of the research subject. Therefore, during this study, I collected primary data as I gathered information from the random selection of staff members who opted to participate in the interviews. Additionally, this group had to comprise the academic (C1), administrative/support (C2) and technical (C3) classifications of permanent staff members between the ages of 18 and 65.

The problem under investigation was considered to exist within the real world, i.e. within the community of SU staff members. Hence, during this study, I had to determine if and to what extent staff members find Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 problematic. In addition, I had to establish why staff members find it difficult to make sense of the areas that they identified. Then I had to apply methods to reduce or eliminate those complexities within the policy document. I thus drew on critical discourse analysis (CDA) to identify content in Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 that attempts to disguise social power relations. Furthermore, I redesigned Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 according to document design principles and I applied plain language techniques.

#### **3.2 Research design**

##### **3.2.1 Applied research**

Applied research is the overall research design that I implemented in this study. According to Hedrick, Bickman and Rog (1993), one of the objectives of applied research is to enhance our understanding of a specific problem in order to try and solve it.

The main aim of this study was to understand the problems that ambiguities in Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 create and then to eliminate those problems. Therefore, the research methodology of this study employed an applied research design.

Additionally, a goal of this study was that the relevant structure(s) of the University like Human Resources (HR) would implement its conclusions accordingly. As a result, I considered an

applied research design to be ideal since it builds on information that is intended to refine or challenge burning collective issues.

As I used data-based research methods like qualitative in-depth individual interviews and focus groups in this study, it is thus safe to say that the research design is practice-oriented (Bleijenbergh, Korzilius & Verschuren, 2010). Additionally, the main aim of this study was to solve a practical problem that I anticipated to exist within an organisation such as SU. Therefore, this study followed a practice-oriented research design.

### **3.3 Qualitative research approach**

I believed that a qualitative research approach was more useful for enhancing the understanding of human behaviour. In addition, qualitative research methods consider the context as well as the social setting.

According to Cassell and Symon (1994), qualitative research methods are sensitive to organisational dynamics, and their objective is to concentrate on individual acts whilst people undertake their normal daily routines. I therefore chose this approach for this study since its aim was to understand the experiences of SU staff members when they are confronted with Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 in their daily circumstances at work.

According to Bickman and Rog (1998), qualitative research methods are beneficial because of its obvious approach in gaining clarity about how participants' perceptions influence their behaviour. Consequently, I selected this mode of research in order to not only understand how SU staff members act upon their understanding of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3, but also to appreciate their context and to determine what developments led them to hold their particular perspectives.

Moreover, the focus of qualitative research methods is on organisational processes and results, whilst these methods are aimed at facilitating insight into both individual and group experiences (Cassel & Symon, 1994). Subsequently, the research design in this study could also be perceived as survey based as I used individual in-depth interviews as well as focus groups.

I asked interview participants and focus group participants to complete the same questionnaire before we commenced with our discussions. This questionnaire required them to provide their demographic information. I used the remaining five questions to guide the discussion during the interviews and the focus groups. The aim of the individual in-depth interviews, together with the focus group discussions, was to obtain information from a number of staff members who represent all permanent staff members in different categories of employment at SU. Therefore, I chose a qualitative approach as this study tried to illuminate individual staff members'

experiences with Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 whilst they collectively identify as part of the SU organisation.

### **3.4 Research methods**

#### **3.4.1 In-depth individual interviews**

I chose face-to-face interviews as they are thought to be the most adaptable form of data collection (Alasuutari, Bickman & Brannen, 2008). It was my perspective that I could structure the interviews to accommodate research participants and encourage them to communicate as comfortably and forthcoming as possible.

Thus, the interviews took on a partly structured format with mostly open-ended questions, designed to stimulate the discussion. Our discussions centred on what participants' thoughts were after they read Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3.

During the structured part of the individual in-depth interviews, I obtained participants' demographic information. Participants completed the questionnaire at the beginning of the interview as I needed their demographic information in order to confirm their age and staff category. I then followed up with polite conversation regarding everyday occurrences to put participants at ease.

I then distributed Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 to participants and I asked them to (re)familiarise themselves with it. Subsequently, I probed them about their experience with the document as well as how it makes them feel. I then asked them to point to certain sections in the document that confused them or that evoked certain emotions in them. Furthermore, I asked them to explain why those sections evoked the emotions that it did.

An in-depth interview requires active listening skills from the researcher and requiring them to ask the right questions during conversations (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Therefore, as this part of the interview was totally unstructured, I allowed the responses of each individual participant to lead me as an interviewer.

According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011), it is important to take note of any power differential that might appear between the interviewer and the participant during the interview situation. I thus highlighted my insider status as a fellow staff member who is also familiar with the context or background of the University.

### **3.5 Redesigning Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3**

After the individual in-depth interviews, I drew on CDA to analyse Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 in order to identify dialogue techniques that those in power often employ to intensify or even deepen existing inequalities (Wodak, 2009). As this method of communication often leads to ambiguities and obscurities within text, I endeavoured to omit such instances from the text as I redesigned the document to be as clear and transparent as possible.

After I analysed the feedback that I received during the individual interviews, I redesigned the document according to document design principles and I rewrote the text applying plain language techniques. I kept the needs of the readers (staff members) in mind. I particularly paid attention to those aspects that interviewees brought to my attention during our discussions.

### **3.5.1 Focus group discussions**

In order to test the outcome of the redesigned document, I conducted three focus group discussions. According to Parker and Tritter (2006), focus groups produce large quantities of qualitative data, therefore they are ideal for policy-related research.

I held separate focus groups for C1, C2 and C3 staff members respectively. I believed that participants would be more forthcoming with their opinions when they were part of a focus group where they felt comfortable. According to Breen (2006), focus groups provide a social environment where people usually form their attitudes and opinions.

Before the discussion commenced, I asked research participants to complete a questionnaire. The first part of this questionnaire required their demographic information. At this point, I also distributed the redesigned document and I asked them to read it.

After they have read the redesigned document and familiarised themselves with it, we continued with the discussion. The rest of the questions merely served as a means to direct and stimulate this discussion.

The responses of staff members determined if and to what extent the rewritten document is an improvement on the current document. As a result, the focus group discussions were the test phase of this study, because staff members provided feedback regarding their interaction with the redesigned document.

I consequently analysed the results of the focus group discussions as I focused on the following aspects that emerged from the focus groups (Breen, 2006):

- the most important themes;
- the most noteworthy quotes;
- any unexpected findings.

### 3.6 Data analysis and interpretation

I followed a qualitative research approach in this study. Consequently, I interpreted and analysed the data that I obtained from the individual in-depth interviews as well as that from the focus group discussions.

#### 3.6.1 Qualitative data analysis

No single set of rules exist for the analysis of qualitative data as flexibility and sincerity to the data are at the core of any qualitative research method (Cassell & Symon, 1994). However, Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) propose the following steps that I followed to analyse and interpret the qualitative data collected during this study.

- **Data preparation phase:** It is important to think about the data that you are going to analyse in relation to the research question (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2011). Since I audio-recorded the interviews, I transcribed them myself in order to note the different levels of meaning such as non-verbal cues of respondents as well as the manner in which participants used language. Whilst I transcribed the recordings, I remembered facial expressions or any other non-verbal cues that came up during our discussion and what they could signify.
- **Data exploration and reduction phase:** According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011), you should think about your data, highlight what you think is important, link these parts together and describe them. I thus summarised my collected data, familiarised myself with it and identified the problematic parts. I collated the data in an Excel spreadsheet. I colour-coded related themes, and in so doing, I linked them together. I then accentuated the relationship between them as I identified their shared features. I also reduced data into fragments that I could analyse. Whilst I interacted with the data in this manner, I inevitably familiarised myself with it.
- **The interpretation phase:** As the researcher is intimately involved with the data, it is imperative that they remain objective (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). I thus did not allow my personal viewpoints to get in the way of discovering a true perspective of the research problem. In other words, rather than to avoid my own biases, I rather acknowledged them. It was thus easier to set them aside and not let them influence how I interpreted the data. This process was necessary to ensure that I could discover the true difficulties staff members encountered with Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3. I was thus mindful to convey the meaning that the research participants derived from the text and not my own.

### 3.7 Validity and reliability

In order for a study to be deemed reliable, researchers should use procedures that would yield the very same results when different researchers apply them to the same research participants.

The researcher should be able to set their own preconceptions and outlooks aside (Cassell & Symon, 1994) whilst at the same time establishing a connection between themselves and interviewee (Hedrick, Bickman & Rog 1993).

In turn, for a study to be valid, it is imperative that it appropriately investigates the subject which it declares to investigate (Cassell & Symon, 1994). During this study the problem under investigation was the following: **Do staff members of Stellenbosch University (SU) perceive Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 as accessible and understandable?** I thus believed that the individual in-depth interviews would set out to examine exactly what was initially stated.

I considered the individual in-depth interviews as valid and reliable for the purposes of this study. Another researcher can use the same questionnaire in order to obtain information from the participants. Additionally, since the information that I required from participants involved an authority figure (SU as employer and renowned institution), the subject matter could be seen as controversial and sensitive. Accordingly, participants were more forthcoming during a conversational one-on-one interview where I as the researcher could establish some sort of rapport with the participants.

It was challenging to get everyone together at the same time in order to conduct focus groups. However, I considered it appropriate to test the effectiveness of the redesigned document as focus group participants are more forthcoming within a communal situation (Breen, 2006). Breen (2006) also believes that a focus group is good method for uncovering new insights into and a deeper understanding of the problem. I thus gained valuable information about how the target audience (SU employees) responded to the redesigned document as the reactions of focus group participants were an indication of this.

### 3.8 Ethical considerations

Firstly, I had to obtain institutional permission from SU's Division for Research Development. The Departmental Ethics Screening Committee (DESC) examined my application, as human beings (staff members of SU) and SU as an organisation were the participants in this study.

They deemed the research as "low risk" since there was very little to no risk involved for anyone who partook in this study. Only after they granted me institutional permission could I apply for complete ethical clearance.

I was not allowed to contact potential interview participants and it was a premise that they should opt to partake in the interviews by themselves. Therefore, I could only proceed to invite participants after the permission process was completed. I advertised in the electronic newsletters of the University and I distributed flyers around campus and on SU's website in order to recruit interview participants.

When staff members chose to be interviewed I asked them to complete a written consent form that was approved by DESC. According to Alasuutari, Bickman and Brannen (2008), it is of the utmost importance to obtain informed consent from participants who voluntarily take part in a research project.

Therefore, I gave a written consent form to participants of the individual interviews. The consent form included an explanation of what exactly this study entailed. I drew their attention to the fact that they could decline or withdraw from the study at any stage, without being penalised in any manner.

The written consent form clearly stated that the participant would have to consent that I recorded the interview. It was also apparent in the written consent form that, should a participant not consent to be recorded, it would not influence their participation in any regard. In the event that a participant objected to being recorded I would have merely proceeded to take notes. However, this was not necessary as no participant objected that I record the interviews.

The focus group consent form also indicated that I would audio-record the discussion; however, it also stated that should one person object to being recorded, I would make notes only. In addition, I highlighted the prospective benefits that the larger SU community could obtain from the results of this study.

### **3.9 Methodological limitations**

Despite the fact that I took great care to randomly obtain research participants who represented all groups during this study, it soon became clear that in practice, and more precisely at SU as an organisation, this was going to be an almost impossible task. Only permanent staff members at SU were the focus of this study; however, it was not possible to interview all the respective representations of the target population. The target population (SU employees) is very heterogeneous and each have their own perspectives, preconceived notions and beliefs.

Additionally, heterogeneity could be a reason why not every possible grouping (Walliman, 2011) would choose to participate in this study.

However, I believe that the sampling of permanent staff members according to the different age groups and job classifications would be the most accurate way of ensuring a true reflection of the population that comprises the permanent staff members of SU. All staff members were given the chance to participate in the interviews, whilst 17 permanent staff members (five C1, six C2 and six C3) opted to do so.

### **3.10 Summary**

I explained the research methodology that I used in this study in a clear and comprehensive manner. In addition, I justified my reasons for the use of an applied research approach at length.

I employed qualitative research methods, i.e. the individual in-depth interviews and the focus group discussions, with the research problem in mind. Additionally, it was my belief that these two data collection tools were best suited to answer the sensitive questions that I discussed in Chapter 2.

In the next chapter (Chapter 4), I will reveal the findings and interpretations of the data that I collected during the individual in-depth interviews, whilst the results of the focus group discussions are outlined in Chapter 5.



## 4 CHAPTER 4

### 4.1 Overview of redesign process of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3

The aim of this study was to improve or eliminate any ambiguities that might appear in Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 of SU. In order achieve this goal, I had to firstly determine the needs of the readers (employees of SU) of the particular policy document. Therefore, I conducted individual in-depth interviews<sup>4</sup> with 17 permanent employees. They comprised the following age groups and staff classifications:

Table 4.1 **Interview Participants**

18–35	C1	2
	C2	2
	C3	2
		<b>6</b>
36–40	C1	1
	C2	2
	C3	2
		<b>5</b>
41–65	C1	2
	C2	2
	C3	2
		<b>6</b>
		<b>17</b>

These interviews took place in no particular order but depended on the participants' availability.

In my opinion, some participants were slightly embarrassed and initially did not want to admit that there were parts in the document that they did not completely understand. Others viewed the interviews as the perfect opportunity for clarifying certain things that they did not understand as they thought I would be able to provide them with answers regarding the content of the document.

During my discussions with participants, they highlighted various themes in Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 that they did not understand or that they deemed problematic. Most participants felt

<sup>4</sup> Refer to Annexure D: Individual interviews data analysis (Excel spreadsheet)

that certain portions of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 are too difficult to read and understand. Therefore, they were unable and even unwilling to engage with it. Participant 1, C3; 36–40 explicitly asked if anyone would willingly want to read this document. This closely relates to the notion of Jansen and Maes (1999) that people are inclined to use goods and services that are clear, apparent and trouble-free. Thus, because they did not experience the document as user-friendly, they pursued alternative ways to seek explanations like to ask line managers and colleagues to clarify these puzzling aspects.

As critical discourse analysis (CDA) represents a quest for enlightenment (Fairclough, 2015), I therefore employed it as a mechanism with which to investigate the reasons for the writing style of the discourse in this policy document. In addition, I used Fairclough's (2012) CDA methodology, which is to join forces with different disciplines i.e. plain language and document design in order to determine if present-day development of public change is evident in Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3.

## **4.2 Discussion of the redesign process of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 based on the individual in-depth interviews**

I redesigned Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 according to Kimble's guidelines for plain language (1996–1997) that I summarised in the literature review (Chapter 2) of this study. Additionally, I determined if the text is written in plain language as I answered the questions of the Plain Language Commission (2011) cited in Cornelius (2015). Additionally, I summarised these plain language guidelines in the literature review (Chapter 2) of this study. In order to ensure that the redesigned text ascribes to effective document design principles, I used De Stadler's (2005:12) case study (*Performance Improvement Programme*) (Annexure A) as an example of what not to do during the redesign process. Furthermore, I was mindful of the seven sins of document design that often make document designers fail, as described by Renkema (1999) as well as Hoeken, Renkema and Spooren (1999).

What is more, I endeavoured to redesign Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 according to De Stadler et al.'s (2005) guidelines for effective document design. I also reviewed the case study mentioned above and these guidelines in the literature review (Chapter 2) of this study.

### **4.2.1 Annual leave**

During the interview discussions, I started off with annual leave because it appears first in Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3. I observed that, at first, participants were very hesitant to admit that they experienced problems with the text. Two participants (P1, C2; 41–65 and P1, C3; 36–40) stated that they understood everything that pertains to annual leave. I did not probe any deeper,

despite the fact that I sensed the contrary to be true, since I could detect they were not prepared to discuss it any further.

Participant 1, C1; 36–40 completely skipped the entire annual leave section and our discussion began with maternity leave. I did not want to stop this participant in order to go back to annual leave, so we just continued without discussing annual leave. The same thing happened with Participant 1, C3; 41–65 as they just ignored this section.

Five participants (2x C1, 41–65, P1, C2; 18–35 and 2x C3, 18–35) initially stated that they understood the annual leave section completely and did not experience any problems with it. However, as our discussion progressed, it became evident that they in fact do not understand everything in such a clear manner.

Nine of the seventeen participants stated from the get-go that there were parts of the text that they did not understand and which confused them. They experienced it as obscure and not plain and simple enough for them to understand.

Seven participants (P1, C1; 18–35, P2, C2; 18–35, P1, C2; 36–40, P2, C2; 41–65, P2, C3; 18–35, P2, C3; 36–40, P2, C3; 41–65) indicated that they did not understand the leave cycle and how it works. Participant 2, C2; 18–35 stated that if they did not work in Human Resources (HR), they would never have understood the intended meaning of 3.3.1. I thus started off explaining the leave cycle and how it works. Additionally, I added a supplementary explanation in the form of an example in order to organise the context accurately as well as to ensure that readers find the information relevant and complete as recommended by Cornelius (2015). Hence, 1.1 in the redesigned document is a combination of 3.3.1.a and 3.3.1.b without the jargon and bureaucratic language. In addition, it is now less pretentious and longwinded.

Two participants (C1; 41–65 and C2; 41–65) relayed the trouble they experienced due to differing interpretations of the text. Both participants elaborated on the dilemmas that often surface because they interpret the text to mean that it is their right to take leave, whereas the line manager interprets it as a privilege. This is a typical disposition of policy documents and relates to Codd's (1998) opinion that because large groups read policy documents, a single meaning is never assigned to it. CDA thus examines the manner in which communication like this creates social control, i.e. how one group manipulates another (Wodak, 2009). Accordingly, I took the situation of the staff member in her/his working environment into account as well as her/his connection to the broader SU community. Therefore, in 1.1 (bullet 1) of the redesigned document I used the phrase: "You may take annual leave..." and removed: "...employees are entitled..."(3.3.1) in order to demonstrate that even though leave is a basic right of workers, how

and when they take that leave are subject to certain conditions. Consequently, I removed any existing confusion and claims of entitlement in the process.

Participant 2, C2; 18–35 voiced her/his acute annoyance with the language use and pointed out that 3.3.1 interchangeably refers to *cycle* and *a year*. The participant made it clear that they prefers the use of one term throughout in order to avoid uncertainty. This participant explained their preference for *per year* and not *a year*, as they considered the use of *a year* to be grammatically incorrect. I am also of the opinion that the use of *per year* is grammatically correct. I thus replaced a year with per year. Additionally, I organised the relevant information into a table, as described below. According to Kimble (1996–1997), one of the guidelines of plain language is to group information into a table because readers then find it easier to acquire the information that they are looking for.

During my interviews with participants I realised that the first thing employees look for when they want to find out anything regarding leave is exactly how many days they qualify for. However, readers could not immediately derive the information they were looking for because of the narrative manner the text sets out the leave entitlement of employees in 3.3.1. Thus, participants had to reread the paragraph a few times in order to fully grasp what they qualify for. In addition, four participants (C1; 41–65, C2; 18–35, C3; 18–35, C3; 36–40) noted that they would have preferred if the text organised employees' leave entitlement in a table or in a bullet format so that they can quickly find the information they need.

As a result, I enhanced the sentence's clarity as I followed important principles of document design that require the writer to anticipate the questions that readers will have and also to structure the answers in a logical order (De Stadler, 2005). Therefore, I rearranged employees' leave entitlement in a clear, systematic table according to post level and number of days so that readers can immediately comprehend the information at a glance. I ensured that they can easily find what they are looking for and experience the text as easy to read and understand.

3.3.1.a proved particularly problematic: "The leave credit in a particular leave cycle increases pro rata over time to reach the maximum at the end of the cycle". Six participants (P1, C1; 18–35, 2x C2; 18–35, P2, C2; 41–65, P2, C3; 36–40, P2, C3; 41–65) highlighted this sentence as problematic. They found the language use puzzling and noted that the terminology was unclear and confused them. Participant 2, C3; 41–65 asked how people with low levels of education are supposed to understand that sentence. According to Janssen and Neutelings (2001), policy writers often use expert language like this as they believe that if they use this type of language, they display a level of sophistication and proficiency. However, it renders the text puzzling and it does not speak to the readers' needs. Additionally, one of the objectives of plain language is that

individuals from different educational backgrounds should be able to understand a text after they read it for the first time (DuBay, 2008).

I thus used plain language when I explained the procedure of the leave cycle. I also removed the words *credit* and *pro rata* so that the very people, meaning SU employees, can understand it and are able to fulfil its conditions. Instead, I offered an example of exactly how the leave cycle works.

Additionally, I removed leave that *expires* (3.3.1.b) and rather directly stated that you will lose unclaimed leave, whilst I explained at the same time when would be a good time to take your annual leave in order to avoid that you lose it.

Participant 2, C2, 18–35 expressed the notion that employees do not talk about *units* (3.3.1.c) when they refer to a day's leave. Therefore, the style and grammar do not fit the readers. Nor does it come together with written communicative text characteristics, meaning it does not display the recognised institutional situation and background (of the University) as is required by document design (Hoeken, Renkema and Spooren, 1999). I thus omitted the word *units* and I merely refer to annual leave of full working days or half working days as this is what readers or employees are familiar with. Accordingly, whilst I changed the language use of the text, I still adhered to the communicative discourse of the University. Even though I removed the word *units*, I replaced them with a word or phrase that the SU society commonly uses in everyday as well as in formal communication.

Moreover, I omitted the formula in 3.3.1.d as I observed during the interviews that participants do not understand it and that it adds no value to the text but it merely confuses them. Two participants (P1, C1; 18–35 and P2, C3; 36–40) admitted that they do not understand the calculations in the formula. Participant 2, C2; 18–35 unequivocally voiced the opinion that from their experience, employees do not need to know the formula because they do not understand it. I thus only stated that the University will pay out your unclaimed annual leave when your employment ends because plain language requires the removal of redundant detail, as described by DuBay (2008).

The term *cost of employment* (COE) also challenged participants. Three participants (2x C1; 18–35 and P2, C3; 18–35) highlighted that they do not have an idea what it means and they would therefore appreciate it if it is explained better in the text. They (P2, C1; 18–35; P2, C3; 36–40) also did not understand what *pensionable amount* is or how it is calculated. According to De Stadler (2005), this is in contrast with the principles of document design as such confusing terms only add to the distress of the readers.

Therefore, I did not include these terms in the annual leave section of the redesigned document because when I omitted the formula, these terms were removed from annual leave as well. However, I deal with it in the sick leave section of the redesigned document (1.2).

#### 4.2.2 Maternity leave

Benefits Policy (DV0406 3.3) suggests that a couple consists of one man and one woman. It does not consider the possibility of two women becoming pregnant or a gay couple adopting a baby. Therefore I could not consider these scenarios in the redesigned document as it speaks to content and I was not permitted to change anything pertaining to content.

During the individual interviews all but three participants (P1, C1; 18–35; P2, C1; 41–65, P1, C2; 18–35) indicated that they struggled to understand maternity leave part. However, as the discussions progressed, I realised that two of the three participants (P1, C1; 18–35, P1, C2; 18–35) experienced quite a few problems with the comprehension of the maternity leave text. At first they indicated that they understood maternity leave quite clearly. However, it was not long before they started to ask various questions regarding the *cycle of three years* and the meaning of *COE*. They also wanted more information on the three days for the birth of a child.

Ten participants (P2, C1; 18–35, 2x C2; 18–35, P1, C2; 36–40, 2x C2; 41–65, 2x C3; 18–35, 2x C3; 36–40) conveyed their bewilderment about the total number of months/pregnancies for which SU permits paid maternity leave. These participants were not only unsure about how many months the University allows, but also about how the employee should split the months in order to qualify for four months' paid maternity leave.

3.3.2.a (bullet 1) elicited many interpretations and emotions from participants. Participant 2, C1; 18–35 asked if a person would qualify for 12 months' maternity leave. This participant understood that a female employee can take maternity leave for 12 months and was confused about the nine months the text mentions.

Participant 2, C2; 18–35 also expressed the strong opinion that 3.3.2.a as well as 3.3.2.a (bullet 1) are not true, but that they are indeed contradicting and misleading since a woman only qualifies for four months' paid maternity leave, with a maximum of nine months. In addition, this participant raised another issue that concerned me: if a woman previously took four months' paid maternity leave for two pregnancies each, and she becomes pregnant for a third time, it means that she only has one month's paid maternity leave left. However, 3.3.2 implies that SU permits her paid maternity leave for three pregnancies. So, is this woman now only entitled to one month's paid maternity leave? Since she cannot go back to work after a month (because according to the law she can only return to work six weeks after she gave birth), should she now

take the other three months as unpaid leave? Conversely, the writer structured the paragraph in such a way that the text only implies a certain meaning. Readers can consequently derive their own meanings as the text merely implies certain things and never explicitly states the case. According to Codd (1988), this is noticeable in policy documents. He mentions that policy documents have differing effects, as readers create their own meanings, which differ from what the text intended. Furthermore, policy makers are often self-centred as they assume that readers will derive a certain meaning from the text and they do not consider that readers will each form their individual understanding and opinion of the text.

Participant 2, C2; 36–40 raised the same issue as the previously mentioned participant – that 3.3.2.a does not mention that a woman will only get paid for three pregnancies; it is only after the participant made the calculations that they figured it out. However, she was still unsure if her calculation was indeed correct and she thought I could give her confirmation. The participant noted that this is a very important point and that the text never explicitly states those three pregnancies anywhere. Additionally, this participant was concerned that dire financial consequences might follow if a woman got pregnant for a fourth time and did not clearly understand how many times she could qualify for paid maternity leave.

Organisational discourse analysis examines the manner in which readers can objectively understand a text, how they can achieve that objectivity and how they can challenge the objectivity of a text. In addition, it examines the level of authority and the manner in which the text justifies that authority, and it observes the consequences of the reader's interaction with that text or authority (Iedema & Wodak, 1999). So because maternity leave (3.3.2) is ambiguous, impersonal and vague, participants found it difficult to understand. The text is difficult to both read and understand. The text does not convey its meaning explicitly but it rather places the responsibility on the reader to make sense of the message it tries to convey. Employees do not question its precise meaning; instead, they tend to infer their own meaning that they derive from past experiences. They proceed according to their own understanding, even if they are not sure if it is correct or not, as they do not want to question the accepted norm. Therefore, employees could be faced with catastrophic consequences if they do not understand the exact meaning of a text. This is a situation that readers do not have to experience if the text simply anticipates the needs of its readers.

Consequently, I rearranged the text's organisation of maternity leave and I clearly divided what SU permits the mother and the father/partner. I used plain and simple language that everybody should understand. One of the objectives of plain language is to produce texts that correspond to the readers' level of understanding (DuBay, 2008).



Document design affirms that successful communication does not require error-free writing, but is rather concerned with the degree to which readers understand the content of a text (Schrivers, 1997). The text should thus speak to the needs of the readers and enable them to firstly understand it in a clear manner. Secondly, it should enable the reader to act unmistakably thereupon. Therefore, I clearly separated what SU allows the mother from what SU allows the father/partner in order for the readers to immediately find the information that relates to them personally.

Hence, I rewrote this section in plain language and according to document design principles. Therefore, maternity leave (redesigned document, 3.3.2) should now be much less ambiguous and complex than what is often typical of policy documents. As a result, readers should be able to comprehend what SU allows the mother and the father/partner much better, because “plain language is not only the great clarifier – it improves accuracy as well” (Kimble 1996–1997: 2).

Additionally, two participants (2x C2; 41–65) both understood that you will qualify for two pregnancies and both wondered what would happen in the case of a third pregnancy. Will you get paid or not?

Another interview was particularly interesting as Participant 1; 18–35 at first just merely stated they do not know how many months SU allows paid maternity leave. Then the participant reread that section and indicated that they thought it was three months but now understood and it to be nine months. Then the participant changed their mind and said it is four months. In the end this participant just gave up and said that after they read that section several times, they were just more confused as they now actually have no idea how many months.

Participant 1, C3; 36–40 was also confused about the nine months, because she always assumed it to be four months as she took four months’ maternity leave for her first pregnancy. She was concerned about how the nine months would function because she had been on maternity leave before and thought she knew how it worked. However, she realised during this interview that there are issues regarding maternity leave that she never knew about and did not understand. She was also very relieved that she no longer needed to worry about the implications for maternity leave as she does not want any more children.

Participant 2, C3; 36–40 also voiced her concern that people will not comprehend how many paid pregnancies SU permits and how the nine months would be split up when they read this section as the same thing happened to her. When she fell pregnant, she read the document in order to understand exactly what SU permits with regards to maternity leave. However, she only understood it after she consulted someone who explained it to her. Additionally, she mentioned



that she wants to understand what she reads and she does not want to go to the trouble to consult external sources like to phone someone to explain something to her.

These different interpretations of the various participants thus portray that 3.3.2 is not clear regarding the total number of months a female employee qualifies for when going on paid maternity leave. Hence, the section is loaded with ambiguity and readers can understand it in more than one way. Scollon (2001) describes CDA as a series of social studies that critically investigate communication. CDA helped me to uncover meanings that the text implies as well as the meanings that staff members derived from the text. As interviewees shared their differing interpretations of and past experiences about how they understood the number of months SU allows for paid maternity leave, I gained an understanding of their points of view. Seeing that CDA is used to challenge superficial values and does not take anything at face value (Wodak, 2009), it can therefore be asked why the writer formulates the text in such an ambiguous manner. Can one see these differing interpretations as conclusions that the readers came to all by themselves and that it was never the writer's intention to transfer those particular meanings? However, I used CDA to identify instances where it was necessary to explore the meanings of certain expressions in this text.

I thus responded to these concerns and confusion of participants and I renamed maternity leave as parental leave. Consequently, I created two sections under parental leave, namely *maternity leave* that speaks to the mother; and *paternity leave* that speaks to the father or partner. Firstly, I started off to explain everything regarding maternity leave, with an explanation of paternity leave after that. I did this in order to adhere to the principles of plain language and I accurately organised the context of the text. I also wanted to ensure that the information is relevant and complete and that it answers readers' questions, thereby ensuring that I speak to their different needs. To write with the reader in mind is also a very important principle of document design.

I considered all these concerns and confusion and I simply stated that SU allows female employees three months paid maternity leave for three pregnancies, or nine months in total. Additionally, I used an example of how to split the nine months. I explicitly used the word *pregnancies* and omitted *confinements* as five participants conveyed their reservations regarding the word *confinements*. Participant 1, C1; 36–40 stated that they do not understand what it means but that s/they will go and look it up if need be. However, this would lead to undue effort on the part of the participant or reader, which is exactly the opposite of what plain language wants to achieve (Stroop & Chürr, 2013). When readers are forced to consult supplementary sources, it also implies that the text was not successful at conveying its message.

Participant 2, C2; 36–40 also did not understand the meaning of the word *confinements* as it is not “plain English” in their view. Furthermore, the participant noted that the word makes them feel jailed or restricted. Participant 2, C2; 18–35 agreed with this idea as they remarked that it is an outdated word that suggests you are bound to something. Participant 1, C2; 18–35 and Participant 2, C3; 36–40 stated that the word is too big and the text should rather use a familiar everyday word that people can identify with. Thus the style and grammar are not appropriate for the readers.

I also drew attention to the fact that a female employee should be mindful of the law when she plans her maternity leave, and I stated the requirements as set out in the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA). I included a brief explanation in a footnote as well as a link to the government’s website for a more comprehensive explanation in this regard. Furthermore, I inserted the following: “This is also applicable when you adopt a child younger than six (6) months” and thus clarified the uncertainty that Participant 1, C2; 18–36, and Participant 2; C3; 36–40 experienced regarding the provisions that apply when you adopt a child. They were not sure if the same conditions that are outlined in maternity leave would apply in this case.

According to De Stadler et al. (2005), one of the requirements of document design is that the writer creates a suitable look and feel of the text and that they pay attention to the layout of the content. Therefore, I set out the conditions that a female employee should meet in order to qualify for paid maternity leave and organised it as a, b and c.

Three participants indicated their irritation with 3.3.2.d because of the following reasons: Participant 2, C2; 18–35 noted that the use of the word *proof* is problematic and that *certificate* or *notification* would be much better. This participant also did not like the language that the text uses as they deemed the word *must* demanding. This participant suggested that the text uses the phrase *kindly request* instead. Participant 1, C2; 41–65 agreed that the text should omit the word *proof* as it seems too lawful in this instance. Additionally, Participant 2, C3; 36–40 added that instead of *proof*, the text should ask for a medical certificate; readers would regard it as much gentler. One can often observe instances of power relations in policy documents, such as in this instance. It is designed to depict the world according to the organisation’s viewpoint. Policy writers normally consist of management, who are inclined to uphold and reproduce the recognised communicative standard of the organisation. They thus use language in a manner to attain a biased goal; they create particular meanings and promote allegiance to a universal communal advantage (Codd, 1988).

In order to remove these negative perceptions that these employees derived about SU from the text I consequently rewrote this section as follows: “SU kindly requests that you provide an

accredited medical notification that indicates your expected delivery date at least four (4) weeks before the start of your maternity leave, or as soon as is reasonably possible.”

Four participants (2x C2; 18–35, P1, C2; 41–65, P2, C3; 36–40) indicated that 3.3.2.a (bullet 4) annoyed them for various reasons. Participant 1, C2; 18–35 and Participant 1, C2; 41–65 claimed that the section makes no mention of the fact that a woman might, for health reasons, need to go on maternity leave earlier than the mentioned one month.

Participant 2, C2; 18–35 did not like the language use of the text in that section as it seems too colloquial and not formal enough. On the other hand, Participant 2, C3; 36–40 deemed that SU seems selfish by using the words for the sake of the smooth running of affairs. The participant perceives them to put their own needs before that of the employee. According to Wodak (2001), power is often visible in the chain of command within organisations, where the authoritative party decides on the most suitable wording of text. As a result, all other parties are situated according to a predetermined location within the social order (Fairclough 2015), whilst the powerful directs them to act in a certain preferred manner. CDA thus examines the manner in which communication creates social control, i.e. how one group manipulates another (Wodak, 2009). This occurrence could also be the state of affairs in this case. Therefore, I considered that the use of that tone as well as that particular phrase can portray SU as an authoritative figure that instructs employees to act in a manner that suits the University.

However, in order to amend that perception as well as the tone of the text, I used language differently and I grouped related themes together. In the redesigned document, I moved the sentence to (b) and rewrote it in the following manner: “SU may ask that you start your maternity leave only one (1) month before your expected delivery date”. Additionally, I removed: “for the smooth running of affairs and after consultation with the employee concerned” because, according to Kimble (1996–1997), one of the guidelines of plain language is to remove redundant detail. I also replaced “expected confinement date” with “expected delivery date” because interview participants claimed that “confinement” is outdated and ambiguous. Moreover, plain language insists that writers align the information in documents with the linguistic proficiency of the intended target audience (Cornelius, 2015).

I clarified 3.3.2.c as I used bullets to set apart the available options in case one might need to extend one’s maternity leave. To begin with, I stated annual leave as an option.

After that, I explained that unpaid leave is another option after your annual leave has been depleted. What is more, I stated that you can claim from the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) for the time that you do not earn a salary. Additionally, I made sure to clarify UIF in a footnote. I also inserted a link to the relevant website should readers require comprehensive

information regarding UIF, because I do not explain it extensively in the revised document. I did this in response to Participant 1, C1; 18–35, who asked how UIF is relevant when you qualify for paid maternity leave. Participant 1, C3; 36–40 was also unsure about how UIF operates. Thus, after they had read this, they had a better understanding of its relevance and the way in which it works. In addition, I decided to rearrange the text organisation and I moved *UIF* and *unpaid leave* closer together because on this occasion, they are related. For instance, when you take unpaid leave for maternity reasons, are you permitted to claim UIF? Furthermore, as prescribed by document design principles, readers can now understand information much easier when the text groups connected ideas.

Then I added that you can apply for sick leave if you need to extend your maternity leave for health reasons. However, I mentioned that you should provide an accredited medical certificate in such a case. Participant 1, C2; 41–65 noted that the tone and the absence of any mention of sick leave in that section leads one to infer that the person who is on maternity leave *wants* to take longer leave for anything but health reasons. Codd (1988) believes that when powerful entities draft policy documents, they often use language in order to serve a political purpose. They construct particular meanings and signs that conceal social conflict and encourage group members to be committed to the notion of a universal public interest. Thus, as no mention is made of sick leave in 3.3.2.c, readers can see this as an implied meaning that SU does not consider health reasons as a motivation for taking longer maternity leave. The employee should therefore be able to return to work after the term of her maternity leave and then take annual leave, but she will not earn a salary if she opts for unpaid leave if her annual leave is depleted.

As a result, in the revised document I stated: “If you need to take leave for health reasons, you must apply for sick leave (you would have to provide an accredited medical certificate)”. In so doing, I tried to effectively redesign that section in order to directly address the needs of the reader as health reasons are in reality one of the main reasons why women might need to extend their maternity leave. Additionally, I used familiar, everyday words in order to portray a softer tone in the message.

Two participants (P1, C2; 18–35, P1, C2; 41–65) expressed the wish that the text should quote labour law in the section on maternity leave, especially where it states: “...further maternity leave will be allowed strictly as required by law”. I removed this sentence from the maternity leave entitlement and I incorporated its explanation in the sections above.

What is more, I brought about the described changes as Participant 2, C2; 36–40 unequivocally revealed to me that if she falls pregnant all she would want to know is how many months will she get paid maternity leave and what other options are available to her if she needs to take

longer maternity leave. Therefore, I clearly state (redesigned document, 1.3.1 (a)) that a female employee is entitled to three pregnancies' (or nine months') paid maternity leave. After that, I explain the available options when women need longer maternity leave (c, page 8) by means of bullets.

I thus clarified these uncertainties as I spoke to the needs of the readers and I anticipated the questions they might have when they read the document for the first time, because, as Schriver (1997) points out, successful communication does not depend on error-free writing, but it is concerned with the degree to which its readers understand the content of a text.

Another participant (P1, C2; 41–65) asked why an employee only qualifies for maternity leave during the last three months of her pregnancy in the event of a miscarriage. On the other hand, Participant 2, C2; 41–65 mentioned that they are aware of the fact that a woman who suffers a miscarriage during the last three months of pregnancy would qualify for maternity leave, specifically because it is stated in the BCEA. Hence, I quoted the law in order to consequently demonstrate that this is not something that SU decided upon but that labour law in South Africa prescribes it.

Section 3.3.2.a (bullet 2) is another section that confused participants for various reasons. Participant 1, C1; 18–35 and Participant 1, C3; 36–40 both complained that this section is not clear. Participant 2, C2; 18–35 noted that the text seems like a direct translation from Afrikaans. This participant believed that the language use is grammatically incorrect and it thus renders the paragraph incoherent and therefore makes no sense.

Concurrently, Participant 1, C3; 18–35, noted that the section is too long and filled with too much information altogether. I simplified this paragraph in the redesigned document and rewrote that long section as follows (e): "SU requires that you continue to work at the University uninterrupted for one (1) year after you had been on maternity leave. If your employment ends before that one-year period finishes, you will be responsible for refunding SU for the outstanding time period. If you do not fulfil these terms, SU has the right to claim any outstanding funds from you." In addition, I added that you will not earn any annual leave whilst you are on maternity leave (f) in order to clear up any confusion that might exist. Participant 2, C2; 18–35 agrees that the text should explicitly state this directive.

I now move on to the newly created section of paternity leave where I enhanced and explained what SU allows for the father or partner. I did so in response to the confusion that research participants relayed to me below.

The question of what SU permits for the father or partner regarding maternity leave stood out during the interviews. Three participants (P1, C1; 18–35, P1, C1; 36–40, P1, C1; 41–65, P2, C3; 18–35) moved on to compassionate leave in search of what SU allows for the father or partner. Participant 1, C1; 36–40 explicitly voiced the opinion that the text should include what SU allows for the father or partner regarding maternity leave, or the text should at least put a reference in maternity leave to compassionate leave. Participant 1, C1; 41–65 agreed with this notion that the text should clarify the father or partner's allowance in maternity leave. Additionally, Participant 1, C2; 41–65 stressed that what the father or partner is allowed is ambiguous. This participant noted that the text should explain it together with what SU allows the mother in the maternity leave section.

Three participants (P2, C2; 36–40, P2, C3; 36–40, P2, C3; 41–65) questioned if maternity leave does in fact contain a section about what SU permits the father or partner. They did not skip to compassionate leave in order to search for it, nor did they recognise that there is a sentence in 3.3.2.b that refers to it: “If her spouse or permanent partner is also in SU’s employ, he or she may use any remaining portion of maternity leave that is available, subject to the same conditions set out in 3.3.2.a.”

Two participants, 2x C3, 18–35, indicated that the above-mentioned section is too hidden and not easy to locate. It is thus not obvious enough and easy to miss, in addition to being ambiguous.

Participant 1, C3; 41–65 made the statement that he does not read maternity leave as it is focused on women and that there is nothing that speaks to him as a father or partner. As our discussion progressed, I drew his attention to the above-mentioned sentence in 3.3.2.b, which is supposed to address the father or partner's allowance. He mentioned that it would be helpful if the text could clarify that section in order for fathers or partners to understand it better. Participant 2, C3; 41–65 agreed with this opinion and added that they do not want to wonder what the text means with that section.

However, strangely enough, nobody asked about cases where only the father and not the mother is an SU employee. In these cases, it would mean that the text does not speak to the father or partner, as the text (3.3.2.b) only speaks to you if your pregnant spouse is an SU employee: “If her *spouse* or permanent partner is also in SU’s employ, he or she may use any remaining portion or maternity leave that is available, subject to the same conditions set out in 3.3.2.a.”

Furthermore, Participant 2, C1; 18–35 said that this section is confusing as they thought that it refers to the mother's maternity leave. Participant 1, C1; 41–65 also at first questioned the existence of paternity leave in 3.3.2. However, as the participant read the mentioned sentence, they made the point that the text should clarify that section in order to indicate that it is not only

the one who gives birth that is allowed leave for the birth of a child. They further stated that “Maternity leave” should be renamed “Parental leave” in order to include the father or the partner who is presently excluded. Participant 1, C1; 36–40 agrees with this sentiment that the text should name this section “Maternity/Paternity” or “Parental leave”.

On the other hand, Participant 2, C2; 18–35 was of the opinion that the text should remove the above-mentioned sentence from maternity leave altogether, as the woman or mother is the only one that would qualify for maternity leave. The participant suggested that the text should not discuss the father or partner’s leave in this section as it is regarded as paternity leave or compassionate leave and not maternity leave. Therefore, the text should explain it in a different section.

I explained the father or partner’s allowance in the new paternity leave section as I agreed with this participant that paternity leave should be separated from maternity leave and even compassionate leave. Hence, I took the following sentence from compassionate leave: “You are entitled to three (3) days’ leave for the birth of your child” and included it in paternity leave.

Consequently, I answered the question of two participants (P1, C2; 18–35, P1, C2; 41–65) about what the meaning of the remaining portion in 3.3.2.b is, as I clarified in the redesigned document that SU allows a spouse to share maternity leave with his partner as paternity leave. Furthermore, I set out the conditions for paternity leave if the spouse is an SU employee by using bullets.

- You are allowed to use this benefit only six (6) weeks after your spouse has given birth.
- You can only take up this benefit earlier if an accredited medical professional has confirmed that your spouse is fit to resume her duties earlier than six (6) weeks after she has given birth.

I did not include the new law that provides 10 days’ leave for fathers or partners for the birth of a child as that law was passed only after these interviews took place. However, I believe that SU should include it in future policy documents regarding paternity leave.

I also mentioned that the same conditions as stated above apply in cases where a child younger than six months is adopted.

Additionally, I rearranged the text organisation of the whole 3.3.2.b as I separated the two unrelated themes that appear together. I clarified the first part of that section earlier on in maternity leave section, whilst I clarified and set out the latter part as defined above. I thus clarified the theme of this section as I structured the message coherently according to De Stadler et al.’s (2005) guidelines for effective document design in order for the reader to focus on the message and follow its reasoning.



### 4.2.3 Study opportunity

Two participants (2x C3; 41–65) completely ignored this section and we did not discuss it at all. Participant 1, C1; 41–65 indicated that it is fairly clear and that they understood it, after which we moved on to another section. The rest of the 14 participants voiced the issues that were not clear or that they did not understand.

Eight participants (P1, C1; 41–65, 2x C2; 18–35, P2, C2; 36–40, 2x C3; 18–35, 2x C3; 36–40) conveyed the trouble they experienced with 3.3.3.a.

To begin with, Participant 1, C3; 18–35 indicated that the information in 3.3.3.a was too much to comprehend and suggested that the text should be put in a table to make it more comprehensible.

Participant 2, C1; 41–65 struggled to interpret the 24 days study leave and wanted the text to clarify if it is a right or a privilege.

Additionally, Participant 2, C2; 18–35 also had difficulty to interpret that section and voiced the opinion that the following phrase (3.3.3.a) is misleading: “...taken either continuously or at intervals”. The participant understood that you should take the 24 days all in intervals and pointed out that there is nothing in 3.3.3 that indicates that you can take the 24 days continuously, besides the phrase (3.3.3.a): “...taken either continuously or at intervals”. However, the participant felt that the text does not state that fact clearly enough. I agreed with this participant (P2, C2; 18–35), because I identified instances of hidden meaning when I used CDA (Fairclough, 2015) to investigate what the text says, how it is said and also the underlying or oblique message that the text does not state explicitly but what certain groups accepts as the norm. In other words, the text does not explicitly state that employees can take 24 consecutive days. The sentence which reads “[e]mployees may be afforded a study opportunity of up to 24 workdays a year, taken either continuously or at intervals,” (3.3.3.a) implies that employees are indeed allowed to take 24 consecutive days. The meaning of the text is thus open for interpretation. The result is that the reader will interpret that section according to the accepted position of their grouping.

Therefore, I decided to reorganise the structure of the text, and I broke up “Study opportunities” into two sections. This also agrees with Participant 1, C3; 18–35 who noted that the section contains too much information. In the redesigned document, I renamed it “Study leave granted at intervals” (1.5.1) and “Uninterrupted study leave” (1.5.2).

In the section “Study leave granted at intervals” (1.5.1), I stated that SU allows employees 24 working days study leave per year, subject to certain conditions. I rearranged the text organisation of that section in order to convey clearly and without any doubt that SU allows the



24 days in intervals and not all at once. In addition, I used simple, direct words because DuBay (2008) believes that plain language endeavours to produce texts that correspond to the readers' level of understanding. Then I proceeded to list those conditions that pertain to the 24 days below that. In doing so, I also clarified that study leave is not a right, but that SU approves study leave on the condition that the employee meets certain requirements.

Four participants (P2, C2; 18–35, P2, C2; 36–40, P2, C3; 18–35, P2, C3; 36–40) were puzzled by 3.3.3.a, bullet 1, “in SU’s interests”. All of them wanted to know what exactly that phrase means. Participant 2, C2; 36–40 mentioned that it is too open to interpretation. Participant 2, C3; 36–40 agreed with this notion and Participant 2, C2; 18–35 added that it is also too vague. Participant 2, C3; 18–35 asked whether it means that you will not qualify for study leave if you do not study at SU. Power relations in organisations as well as in the general society have an influence on orders of communication and the beliefs of what they represent (Fairclough, 2015). Significant to this perception is that authority figures can greatly influence the public’s viewpoints, meaning that the writers of Benefits Policy (DV0406 3.3.3.a (bullet 1)) influence employees’ understanding of the language that they use in that phrase. I employed CDA in order to uncover the implications of the text as well as the meanings that employees derive from that phrase. As participants are confused by the text and ascribe different meanings to it, I thus rewrote 3.3.3.a (bullet 1) and I stated the first condition in the redesigned document (1.5.1 (a)): “You may only enrol for courses that are deemed to increase your competence within your work environment.” I used a softer, more humane style and directly addressed the reader in order to clarify what is meant by “in SU’s interests”. My reasoning was that if employees uplift themselves, SU would automatically benefit as a result.

I then rewrote 3.3.3.a (bullet 3) after that in order to ensure a coherent structure in (1.5.1 (b)): “When you are granted a study opportunity, you and your head of division will determine the conditions of your progress.” It is only logical to want to know what happens after you receive a study opportunity instead of wanting to know how many days you get for every examination; one would think of that later, therefore I positioned it later in the text.

Only two participants (P1, C1; 18–35, P2, C2; 18–35) observed that 3.3.3.a (bullet 3) is unclear and very incoherent. Participant 1, C1; 18–35 stressed that the text should clarify how satisfactory progress works and exactly when SU will deduct study leave from your annual leave if your progress is not up to standard. Participant 2, C2; 18–35 was more concerned about the text organisation as they felt that the text never made it clear that study leave is linked to progress and that this information is just suddenly sprung upon you. Therefore, I broke up that

section and explained it in bullets after 1.5.1 (b). I defined both the situation in which SU deems progress as acceptable and the situation SU deems it unacceptable.

I then proceeded to state the conditions that apply to study leave taken at intervals, and I explicitly stated that the conditions include the 24 days. In so doing, I ensured that readers do not need to wonder if the conditions include the 24 days or not. Participant 1, C3; 36–40 was unsure of what exactly the 24 days include. Additionally, Participant 2, C3; 36–40 wished that the text would explain the procedure of the 24 days explicitly. Participant 1, C2; 18–35 did not know if all the mentioned provisions are included in the 24 days or not, whilst Participant 1, C1; 36–40 wondered if the two days for the exams are also included. I thus rewrote the text in such a manner that these participants, as well as other readers, will be able to discover, understand and apply the intended information in the proposed fashion after they have read the text only once.

The information in the bullets thus answers the questions that participants posed during the interviews. For instance, Participant 1, C3; 36–40 can now clearly derive from 1.5.1 (c) bullet 1 that the 24 days include the two days per exam. Two participants (P2, C2; 18–35, P2, C3; 18–35) asked if employees who do not study at SU also qualify for study leave, as the text is ambiguous in this respect. Additionally, Participant 1's (C2; 18–35) interpretation was that the study opportunity only refers to courses that SU pays for; however, the text does not state or imply this in 3.3.3. Therefore, I rewrote that bullet (1.5.1 (c) bullet 2) as: "You are allowed to attend lectures, tutorials and practicals at SU. This includes the full length of these sessions. It also includes breaks between periods as well as 20 minutes." It is now clear that this speaks to you if you study at SU. Additionally, Participant 2, C2; 36–40 no longer has to wonder if the allowed time includes the 20 minutes, since I explicitly state that it is in fact included.

I rewrote 3.3.3.a (bullet 4(3)) in the active voice and I addressed the reader directly (redesigned document, 1.5.1 (c) bullet 3): "You may attend a maximum of three (3) lectures per week." It is thus clear to readers that one can only attend three lectures per week during working hours. Participant 1, C1, 18–35 who was unsure about how many lectures could be attended now also knows exactly what SU allows.

Participant 2, C2; 18–35 noted that the text only highlights travel time to attend classes outside of Stellenbosch but it says nothing about the time spent attending those classes. The participant wanted the text to be clearer on that aspect. Therefore, I rewrote that section as (1.5.1 (c) bullet 4): "The time that you travel to attend classes outside of Stellenbosch will be taken from your annual leave." As a result, it is now clear that study leave does not apply to the travel time or for class time but that annual leave will apply. I could not amend the text to include anything regarding class time as that involves content. Participants 1 and 2 C2; 41–65 both noted that the

text does not make provision for administrative staff who pursue a Master's or PhD degree. Unfortunately, this issue also refers to content and I could therefore not address it. The aim of this study was not to amend content in any way but merely to reorganise and reformulate the content so that readers can accurately understand it.

In accordance with the conventions of plain language, I replaced the word “debit” with “taken”. The word “debit” seemed too bureaucratic and not direct enough. Participant 1, C1; 36–40 had trouble with that word and understood that SU will give the employee additional travelling time, whilst it actually mean that SU will take your travelling time from your annual leave.

Section 3.3.3.b is another section that troubled participants; therefore, I restructured the whole text organisation of this section, under the heading 1.5.2 Uninterrupted study leave.

Participant 1, C2; 18–35, indicated that 3.3.3.b should explicitly specify that it is focused on lecturers. Only after the participant read this section did they notice the footnote (it primarily concerns lecturers, who is expected to possess a doctorate) on page nine of Benefits Policy (DV 0406 3.3). The participant then voiced their annoyance, because if they had realised the text does not focus on them, they would never have read it. Participant 2, C3; 36–40 agreed that that the footnote is not immediately visible; therefore, the text should clearly indicate that this section only applies to lecturers. Both these participants thus experienced that 3.3.3.b does not speak to their needs as readers because they are not lecturers; therefore, they do not want to read information that does not focus on their own needs.

I thus inserted the following sentence right under the heading “Uninterrupted study leave” (1.5.2): “This benefit pertains to you if SU requires that you obtain a particular qualification such as a doctorate.” I also changed the wording in order to include employees who are not lecturers but who are also expected to obtain a doctorate. I rewrote the text in order to address the needs of the reader as I speak to their profile or identity. As cautioned by De Stadler et al. (2005) I refrained from communicating in general and I directly focused on those employees that have to obtain a doctorate.

I proceeded to break up 3.3.3.b as it contained too much information and readers paid less attention because it was too long and incoherent. I merely stated: “You may be granted a once-off study opportunity of one (1) year if you fulfil the following requirements.” Thereafter, I outlined and explained the requirements from a) to d). I outlined the requirements clearly, as they are the core message in that section. Additionally, De Stadler et al. (2005) recommend that the writer should explicitly focus on the main message that the text wants to convey. The writer will thus aid the reader to understand the core message of a text.

Three participants (P1, C1; 36–40, P1, C2; 41–65, P1, C3; 36–40) struggled to interpret 3.3.3.b (bullet 1): “The employees concerned must be appointed permanently and must have been in SU’s employ for at least two years.” They indicated that they are unsure if they interpreted the text correctly and they would like that sentence to be less ambiguous and more explicit. Participant 1’s (C1; 36–40) understanding of that sentence was that you do not have to work at SU on a permanent basis for at least two years in order to qualify; you can qualify before you reach the two years. Participant 1, C2; 41–65 did not have any suggestions; the participant merely asked if the employee must have been in permanent SU employment for at least two years, or if the employee should work at SU for two years, regardless of the status of their employment. On the other hand, Participant 1, C3; 36–40 relayed that they interpret it to mean that you have to work at SU for two years in order to qualify. These three participants all understood the same text in different ways. Conversely, it appears that the goals of this text are to inform staff of this benefit. However, given that different employees formed different opinions and interpretations of the text, it is clear that the text did not realise its goal because participants conveyed their confusion about its meaning. In this manner, the writer did not clearly define the informative and instructional goals in the text. Document design requires the informative and instructional goals of a text to be undoubtedly visible from the start (De Stadler, 2005).

Therefore, I rewrote that section according to my own interpretation of its meaning: “You must hold a permanent appointment and you must have been in SU’s employment for no less than two (2) years.” In so doing, I explained that in order to qualify for the opportunity, SU requires that you hold a permanent position at the time of the opportunity. In addition, you have to have worked at SU for at least two years.

I rewrote 3.3.3.a (bullet 2) in plain language and spoke to the reader directly: “You must perform your duties well.” Four participants (P1, C1; 18–35, P1, C1; 36–40, P1, C2; 41–65, P1, C3; 36–40) voiced their confusion as well as apprehension about the language use “duties well”. They were concerned about what that phrase means, and how employees (can) interpret it. However, unfortunately I could not gain a clearer understanding of its meaning as the author of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 did not respond to my requests for an interview. Hence, for fear of altering the content, I merely continued to write the text in plain language, whilst I made sure that I ascribe to document design principles at the same time.

Two participants (P1, C1; 18–35, P1, C1; 36–40) indicated that they had trouble understanding 3.3.3.b (bullet 3). Participant 1, C1; 18–35 stated that the section is too long and that it contains too much information. Participant 1, C1; 36–40 wanted the text to be clearer and asked if SU

would require you to reimburse them with leave days. I rearranged the text organisation of that section and broke it up into two separate points.

Firstly, I frankly stated that SU requires that you continue to work at the University for at least two years after your study opportunity finishes. Then I continued to explain (in bullet format) that in the event that your employment ends before you have worked for two years after the study opportunity, the remaining time would be deducted from your annual leave. Additionally, as plain language ensures that the text is aligned with the linguistic competence of the target audience (Cornelius, 2015), I removed the jargon (“pro rata” and “debited”) and replaced it with common words that readers are familiar with.

I applied the same principle when I rewrote 3.3.3.b (bullet 4) as four participants (2x C1, 18–35, P1, C1; 36–40, P2, C1; 41–65) expressed that they struggled to understand it. Participant 1, C3; 18–35 indicated that the information is too much to process and if it was organised in a table, it would be easier to understand. However, instead of organising the content in a table, I explained in the redesigned document (1.5.2 (d)) that you may acquire study leave of one year or 250 days.

After that, I clarified in a bullet below that should your study leave take longer than the above-mentioned period, those additional days will have to come from your annual leave. In addition, I expressed that if your annual leave days are not enough to cover this shortfall, it will come from leave that you are yet to build up. I also removed the words “credits” and “pro rata” as well as “leave cycle” since interview participants pointed out that they see these words as jargon and that they were confusing.

#### **4.2.4 Research opportunity**

Six participants (2 x C2; 18–35, P2, C2; 36–40, P2, C2; 41–65) totally ignored the section on research opportunities. Participant 1, C1; 18–35 stated that they did not experience any problems with this section and understood everything in it. I got the impression that the participant did not pay much attention to it and simply wanted to move on.

Three participants just stated that it is only focused on academics and that they were not prepared to discuss it further as it is not directed at them. Participant 1, C2; 36–40 added that it makes them feel excluded as they are not an academic. According to Wodak (2001), the grammar that is used within a text can often indicate certain instances of power relations. From my knowledge of CDA, I thus deduced that such employees felt powerless and disgruntled as the text does not speak to them. SU exerts control through the genre of the text. Only eight participants conveyed their confusion regarding the “Research opportunity” section.

Three participants indicated that they had trouble understanding 3.3.4.a. Participant 1, C1; 41–65 pointed out that the section is too broad. This participant also wondered how it would apply to them personally, as the text does not address them but only speaks in general. Participant 2, C1; 41–65 had the same issue, as they stated that it is unclear who the text refers to. The phrase “research brief” in particular makes them wonder if it is focused on academics as it is expected of academics to do research.

Therefore, I changed the heading “Research opportunity” to “Research leave” in the redesigned document. It is more fitting as it deals with leave that you can qualify for when a research opportunity arises.

I proceeded to reorganise the text and I arranged the unconnected pieces of information separately. I started by saying: “If you are required to do research, you may be granted research leave of a maximum of thirty (30) working days after every one (1) year of uninterrupted service.” In so doing, it is thus clear that the text is focused on you if you are required to do research. The text thus speaks to you personally if you are someone that has to do research as the text addresses you directly and speaks to your needs. By using the words “you may be granted”, it is also clear that research leave is not a right but a privilege that SU bestows on you after every year’s employment at the University. This clarification should therefore remove the doubt that Participant 1, C1; 41–65 had about whether a research opportunity is a right or a privilege. I wrote a separate sentence that states you will only receive this benefit if you satisfy certain requirements.

In addition, Participant 1, C1; 36–40 pointed out that they were confused about the 250 working days. The participant requested more clarity in terms of months.

However, I kept the notion of days as organisations usually make mention of days when they refer to leave of any kind. This is also the case at SU where employees also speak in terms of days when they refer to leave. Additionally, interview participants expressed their preference in this regard, and in order to communicate according to the communicative norm of the University, I stated that SU may grant you 250 working days if you qualify for the above-mentioned benefit (redesigned document, 1.6 (a)). I also wrote this section in plain language and I addressed the reader directly.

I was not entirely sure how SU rationalises 250 days as a requirement employees have to meet. Perhaps it is more of a condition that SU can only grant you 250 days at a time, but I was not sure. In order to avoid that I alter the content of the text, I did not change it. Moreover, as I mentioned previously, I could not get an interview with the author of Benefits Policy (DV 0406 3.3) in order to enhance my own understanding of the content.



In the redesigned document, I continued with the requirements that you should meet in order to qualify with the next section in 1.6 (b): “Your performance as a researcher must have been acceptable during the previous three (3) to (5) years. This is according to the requirements of your faculty and as approved by the Executive Committee of Senate.” Participant 1, C2; 41–65 pointed out that 3.3.4.a (bullet 2) excludes people who do research for the first time. I could not alter the content, and since the aim of the text is to focus on people who have done research in the past, I added a bullet after the sentence in b) in order to emphasise this in the following manner: “You will thus not qualify for the benefit if you have not done any previous research.”

On the other hand, Participant 1, C3; 18–35 expressed that they are unaware about the Executive Committee of Senate (the EC (S)). The participant asked: “Who are these people and where do I find them?” I thus explained this question in a footnote on page seven and also entered a hyperlink to serve as background information to readers who might also experience the same problem.

Participant 1, C2; 41–65 mentioned that they are frightened by the language use of 3.3.4.b. According to this participant, the grammar is incorrect and the language does not portray the type of language that HR departments usually use. The participant specifically highlighted the following phrase: “meant in”. They go on to question what is meant by “in the University’s interests”. I thus altered the language use, used terms that are more common and amended the grammar so that the paragraph should be easy to understand and user-friendly in order for the reader to operate effectively after they have internalised the text. Therefore, I restructured the text organisation and divided the different themes into different sections. Moreover, I explained SU’s interests in the second bullet (redesigned document, 1.6 (c)) as I highlight that research leave should benefit SU.

Only Participant 1, C2; 41–65 had difficulty with 3.3.4.c. This participant noted that the text should explicitly state what it means with “in SU’s interest”. Therefore, I rewrote this sentence in the redesigned document (1.6 (d)) to state that your research leave should not be a cause of disruption to the daily operational requirements of your department.

Four participants (P1, C1; 18–35, P1, C1; 36–40, P1, C1; 41–65, P2, C3; 36–40) all wanted clarification on what “corresponding period” means. Additionally, Participant 1, C1; 18–35 noted that the language use of that section confuses them even more. The participant stated that instead of “corresponding period”, the text should state that you have to stay for 250 days. On the other hand, Participant 1, C1; 41–65 wondered if “corresponding period” means you have to stay for 30 days. In order to explain the meaning of “corresponding period”, I rewrote that section in the redesigned document (1.6 (e)) as follows: “If a research opportunity is granted to

you, SU requires that you continue to work for the University for no less than the amount of time granted to you.” In so doing, it is thus clear that you have to work for SU for the same amount of time than you took for research leave.

Participant 2, C3; 36–40 pointed out that the text should also explain “pro rata portion”. I clarified this in a bullet (redesigned document, 1.6 (e)). It is thus now clear that if you leave SU before you have worked back the total time that you still owe, SU will take that time due from your annual leave.

#### **4.2.5 Compassionate leave**

All but one participant (P1, C1; 41–65) noted that compassionate leave confused them and they thus found it difficult to understand. The one participant who was not confused stated that everything regarding compassionate leave seemed fine and that they understood it. However, I got the impression that the participant did not pay much attention to it and simply wanted to move on.

For starters, when we got to compassionate leave, Participant 2, C2; 36–40 was under the impression that compassionate leave was a sub-section of family responsibility leave. Participant 1, C1; 36–40 also noted that family responsibility leave would sound more appropriate. Additionally, Participant 1, C3; 36–40 noted that the text is outdated and asked who designed it.

Section 3.3.5.a proved to trouble and concern 15 participants as they relayed the many dilemmas they faced when they read that section. All of them were aware of and had no difficulty with the three working days per year. However, when we came to another 14 days during every three-year cycle, the participants became confused. Five participants (P1, C1; 41–65, P1, C2; 36–40, P2, C2; 41–65, P2, C3; 18–35, P2, C3; 41–65) indicated that they were not aware of an extra 14 days. Three participants (P2, C2; 41–65, P1, C3; 36–40, P1, C3; 41–65) were unsure what it means and how you would apply for it. Participant 2, C1; 18–35 felt that the text should have used language differently; perhaps the participant would have then understood that section better.

Three participants (2 x C3; 41–65, P2, C3; 36–40) added that they have only known about the three days, which is what they always took. When Participant 1, C3; 41–65 became aware of the extra 14 days, they said that the text should perhaps state that the three days is a requirement of the BCEA and that the added 14 days is an allowance that SU grants to its employees.

Six participants (P1, C1; 18–35, P1, C2; 36–40, P2, C2; 41–65, P2, C3; 18–35, P1, C3; 41–65, P2, C3; 41–65) noted that the cycle of three years confused them even more, as it does not clearly state how many days they can take. Participant 1, C3; 18–35 was agitated with this cycle (after we also discussed it in annual leave) and suggested that the text should stop referring to the



cycle and it should convey the information in a plain and simple manner as the present language use is too elevated. Participant 1, C3; 36–40 agreed with this notion and wondered why the text continues to refer to this cycle.

In addition, five participants stated that they now have no idea regarding the total number of days. Participant 2 (C3; 41–65) explicitly stated that the text does not clearly state the number of days, and that the way in which the total number of days is arranged is confusing. In addition, the participant noted that the text need not be so complicated; it could have conveyed the information in a much simpler manner.

Participants (2x C2; 18–35, P1, C2–36–40, P1, 2x 41–65) were even more confused about the sum of 23 days and insisted that the text should clarify its calculation. Participant 1, C3; 18–36 was the only one who correctly figured out the calculation, with effort. The participant then noted that the text should ensure that the calculation is evident as they do not want to try and figure it out. Participant 1, C3; 36–40 agreed wholeheartedly and wondered why the text wants to force them to do maths, and added that not everybody is clever enough to work out the calculation.

Firstly, I renamed *compassionate leave* to *family responsibility leave* (1.4) in the redesigned document. Additionally, I moved it to the fourth section after parental leave, as that is where it is positioned in the BCEA. I did this because, according to document design principles, the responsibility remains with the writer to consider the needs of the reader and to ensure that the reader finds the text easy to read and to understand (De Stadler, Basson & Luttig, 2005). In order to achieve this objective, the writers of policy documents should anticipate the requirements their audience might have regarding their text and they should endeavour to address it through the use of simple, understandable, modern and progressive language use in their documents.

With the accounts and requirements of participants in mind, I proceeded to rewrite 3.3.5 a. I arranged the total number of days in an organised table. I clearly indicated the number of days set out in the BCEA per year as well as for every three years. I did the same with the additional 14 days and I indicated that those days are an added benefit from SU. Thus, readers can now very easily deduce exactly how many days SU permits them. In addition, I made sure not to use the word “cycle”, since it only antagonised research participants and created distance between themselves as readers and the text. I thus applied a directive of plain language when I organised the information into a table. In so doing, I closed the literacy gap, because everyone does not have the same reading skills.

Section 3.3.5.c is another section that confused participants and evoked many questions from them. Participant 2, C1; 18–35 could not understand if and how the occurrences set out in 3.3.5.c

tie in with the previously mentioned three days compassionate leave. Participant 1, C3; 36–40 stated that the text (3.3.5.c) does not specify how many days SU allows; therefore, it is problematic to move back and forth between the two sections. Participant 1, C1; 36–40 wondered if occurrences which the text (3.3.5.c) does not mention would qualify for compassionate leave.

In the redesigned document, I thus rearranged the text organisation and stated that according to the BCEA, you are entitled to family responsibility leave and consequently listed the instances in a bullet format. It should thus be clear that the mentioned instances are sanctioned by the BCEA as lawful family responsibility leave. I added a sentence after the bullets that you can take this leave for a portion of a day or for one or more full days. It is thus now clear that the days organised in the table refer to these occurrences, and that you can take it in portions of days or full days.

However, I did not include the birth of an employee's child (3.3.5.c (bullet 1)) in these occurrences because of the confusion that participants relayed during the interviews.

Participant 2, C3; 36–40 immediately assumed that 3.3.5.c (bullet 1) probably refers to the dad or partner. However, participant 1, C1; 41–65 insisted that the text should state or at least provide a reference to the birth of an employee's child (3.3.5.c (bullet 1)) in maternity leave. Participant 1, C2; 18–35 agreed with this notion to a certain extent as they stated that the text should refer the partner or father to maternity leave for the birth of a child. In addition, Participant 2, C2; 18–35 noted that the text should include the birth of an employee's child in paternity leave. Participant 2, C2; 18–35 asked if 3.3.5.c (bullet 1) does not belong in maternity leave. Additionally, they became even more confused when they realised that the woman would already be on maternity leave and cannot qualify for compassionate leave. The participant then suggested that perhaps the text should include a reference to maternity leave.

On the other hand, two participants (P2, C2; 18–35 and P2, C2; 36–40) asked if you can be on maternity as well as on compassionate leave at the same time. Moreover, Participant 2, C2; 36–40 asked why the text includes the birth of an employee's child in compassionate leave in the first place. They suggested that the text should rather refer readers to maternity leave.

Participant 1, C2; 41–65 was very confused as to what the birth of an employee's child means. Additionally, this participant questioned the identity of the employee who would qualify for compassionate leave for the birth of an employee's child. In their opinion, it could certainly not refer to the mother who is already on maternity leave because you cannot be on maternity as well as on compassionate leave at the same time. Participant 1, C3; 36–40 agreed with this notion. .

This participant then asked if they would be able to qualify for compassionate leave when a colleague's child is born.

Consequently, all the above-mentioned participants were more confused than ever after reading that section, and they wanted the text to provide clarity regarding when one would be able to qualify for compassionate leave for the birth of an employee's child. However, I did not address this issue in the redesigned document in family responsibility leave (1.4), as I included it in the newly created section of paternity leave (1.3.2) in the redesigned document. Additionally, I also discussed the changes in the previous section of maternity leave (4.3).

The use of the word *proof* in 3.3.5.d evoked many negative emotions from participants during the interviews. Participant 1, C1; 18–35 noted that in some emergencies it is not possible to provide proof, whilst Participant 1, C2; 18–35 directly stated that the word *proof* does not make them feel good.

Participant 1, C1; 36–46 asked what kind of proof the text refers to and added that the word *proof* offends them, even though they understand that SU would need verification in certain instances. Participant 1, C2; 41–65 agrees that the text should be clearer as to what kind of proof it refers to. Additionally, Participant 1, C3; 18–35 wondered if a doctor's note or death certificate would constitute reasonable proof, as the text is not clear. Through the lens of CDA, it seems like SU uses its power in this instance to direct its employees by means of the language use that it employs in text (Wodak 2001).

Participant 1, C1; 41–65 highlighted that the text indicates that SU wants proof *before* it grants compassionate leave. This participant made the point that it is not always possible to know in advance that you are going to need to apply for compassionate leave. Participant 2, C3; 18–35 agreed and added that it is not always possible to provide proof before an incidence takes place. Participant 1, C3; 36–40 agreed and claimed that you do not know when someone is going to die; therefore, it is not possible to provide proof beforehand. Participant 1, C2; 41–65 added that an incident often occurs unexpectedly and you would only apply for compassionate leave after the fact. Participant 1, C2; 36–40 cautioned that even though they understood that SU would need proof, the University should be mindful of when they want it as it is not always possible to provide proof beforehand.

Participant 2, C3; 36–40 added that the style choices seem harsh and that SU should be more sensitive and perhaps ask that proof is provided as soon as possible. Participant 1, C2; 36–40 concurs and points out that compassionate leave is usually a sensitive issue but the language used by SU is insensitive. Participant 1, C2; 41–65 added that the word *proof* should be replaced with *letter* or *memo*.

As the authoritative party influences the decision regarding the most suitable wording of text, all other parties are situated according to a predetermined location within the social order (Fairclough, 2015). As policy writers are usually at the top of the command chain, they are usually the ones who decide how to apply language. They often do not provide any opportunity to those lower down in the hierarchy to provide any form of input. Language is a communal exercise and it is essential to look at the situation in which it functions when one focuses on the relationship between language and power (Wodak, 2009). This implies that SU directs its employees as the University demands something such as proof of an instance even before it took place. Consequently, the employees are powerless since they cannot always adhere to such an unreasonable request. In addition, through CDA, the imbalance and inconsistency of communicative characteristics in society are thus evident in 3.3.4.d, since CDA often identifies the conversational methods that those in power use in order to alleviate or even deepen the existing inequality (Wodak, 2009).

As a result, I did not use the words proof or before when I rewrote that section. However, I do not interpret that SU really means that employees should provide proof before the fact. In my opinion, the unfortunate language use changed the meaning of the text to something SU had not intended. According to Taylor (2004), discursive and language issues influence how people read, implement and employ policy texts (Taylor, 2004) – which to my mind is exactly what has happened here, even though it was not what SU intended.

I thus rewrote 3.3.5.d in the redesigned document as follows (1.4(b)): “SU may request confirmation such as a medical or death certificate in order to approve your family responsibility leave.” I also rearranged the text organisation of this section (I moved it to before 3.3.5.d in the redesigned document).

#### **4.2.6 Leave of absence**

Many participants were confused by the leave of absence section, which they frequently mixed up with the *Continuation of work elsewhere* section.

Five participants (P1, C1; 18–35, P1, C2; 18–35, 2x C3; 18–35, P1, C3; 36–40) indicated that they had no problem with understanding it, after which we swiftly moved on. Four participants (P1, C2; 36–40, P2, C2; 41–65, 2x C3; 41–65) ignored this section completely and we never discussed it during the interviews.

Three participants (P2, C1; 18–35, P1, C1; 36–40, P2, C1; 41–65) initially indicated that they did not have trouble understanding leave of absence; however, it quickly became clear that they had more questions than answers. Participant 1, C1; 41–65 immediately made the point that it is only

relevant to teaching staff, which creates the impression that the text does not meet the needs of the reader. I thus systematically explained SU's conditions for granting leave of absence and what happens in each situation when employees apply and qualify for leave of absence. I also drew attention to the fact that this is relevant to all SU employees, as all have to be out of the office to engage in official SU activities from time to time. Only four participants (P2, C2; 18–35, P2, C2; 36–40, P1, C2; 41–65, P2, C3; 36–40) shared their confusion and questions from the start.

Furthermore, three participants (P2, C1; 18–35, P1, C1; 36–40, P2, C2; 46–65) questioned how leave of absence ties in with working from home. They searched for the phrase “working from home” under the heading Leave of absence. When they could not find it there, they moved on to look for it under Continuation of work elsewhere. They searched for the phrase “working from home” because that is the phrase that appears on Sun-e-HR (SU's electronic self-service system for employees); however, that phrase was nowhere to be found in Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3. According to Taylor (2004), this occurrence of readers deriving their own meanings is typical of policy documents as it uses strategies like these; where readers understand something that was never stated in the text to influence readers to take up ideas or discourses that the powerful spreads.

Participant 1, C2; 41–65 voiced their frustration in reaction to the misalignment of language use in the system and the policy. According to this participant, “working from home” is the phrase that Sun-e-HR uses, therefore Benefits Policy (DV 0406) should also use that particular phrase. As I could not change the content of the policy document in order to align the wording with the system, I used the existing policy on “Continuation of work elsewhere” and I incorporated “Working from home” into “Leave of absence” with the following sentence in the redesigned document (1.7 (d)): “You may be allowed leave to perform your duties somewhere else after consultation with your environmental head or dean.”

Participant 1; C1, 41–65 and Participant 1, C1; 36–40 said that they recognised a connection between “Leave of absence” and “Continuation of work elsewhere”. They further expressed the belief that the text should combine the two sections. This further confirmed my perception that I should amend the text organisation as it is inaccurate. Hence, I exercised one of the main objectives of document design and considered the needs of the readers and the reasons why they would read the document in the first place, as stated by Schriver (1997). In this case it would be to find out exactly how leave of absence functions.

Two participants (C2; 18–35, C3; 36–40) expressed their confusion as to what is meant by “in SU's interest” (3.3.6.a). The timeframe also posed a problem as four participants (P1, C1; 36–40,

P2, C1; 41–65, P2, C2; 18–35, P2, C2; 39–40) were unsure of how long SU would permit leave of absence. Additionally, two of these four participants (P2, C1; 41–65 and P2, C2; 36–40) were concerned as to exactly how many times SU would permit leave of absence, or in other words, on how many occasions would you qualify for leave of absence.

Participants identified that they not know what the text (section 3.3.6.b) means by: “Leave may also be granted for longer periods”. I consequently addressed their concerns as I combined the two relevant themes in the redesigned document (1.7 (a)): “You may be granted leave of absence for a maximum of fifteen (15) working days every time that you attend gatherings such as conferences and meetings officially recognised by SU.” I proceeded to simplify that a longer period is when the opportunity exceeds 15 days and rewrote it as: “If the period exceeds fifteen (15) working days, the additional days will then be deducted from your annual leave.” In other words, I reorganised and logically structured the content, and in doing so, I included the reader and spoke to them directly. Thus, I answered their questions as I stated what is offered, how it is offered and when it will be offered, as recommended by De Stader (2005:12).

Furthermore, I removed the section on longer periods or for certain activities (3.3.6.b), as it is longwinded and makes the section difficult to understand. In addition, I already clarified it in 1.7 (a). Moreover, it refers to instances that would not qualify for leave of absence and the text organisation thus seemed ambiguous.

Three participants (C2; 18–38, C2; 36–40, C3; 36–40) also indicated that the latter part of 3.3.6.b confused them: “... the number of days by which the leave period is exceeded be debited against the employee’s annual or accumulated leave”. They mentioned that the section is ambiguous, vague and the language use contains jargon. Consequently, I removed the jargon and replaced it with plain words because plain language requires the use of words and phrases that readers are familiar with (Schrivver, 2010). Additionally, in the redesigned document, I clarified it as stated above in the bullet below 1.7 (a). Readers will now only have to read the text once to be able to discover, understand and apply the intended information. Employees can thus now clearly deduce that if they are away for longer than 15 days, it no longer qualifies for leave of absence, but instead becomes annual leave.

Section 3.3.6 does not directly address the reader; therefore, distance is created between the reader and the text, which is intensified by the use of the passive voice. As a result, I rewrote the sentence in the active voice and I directly addressed the reader. De Stadler (2005) deems this technique as typical of successful document design.

I followed the same approach to section 3.3.6.d; however, in the redesigned document, I broke that sentence up into two sentences and added the complementiser “that”: “SU requires that you

provide a copy of the subpoena”, as participants previously noted that they do not like the word “proof”, since it seems demanding and legalistic.

#### **4.2.7 Continuation of work elsewhere**

Four participants (C1; 18–35 C2; 36–40, 2x C3; 41–65) did not discuss this section with me. One participant stated that this section makes perfect sense, after which we moved on to the other sections.

Seven participants (C1, 36–40, 2x C2; 18–35, C2; 36–40, 2x C3; 18–35, C3; 36–40) admitted straight away that they have no idea what this section refers to.

Four participants (2x C1; 41–65, C2; 41–65, C3; 36–40) confused continuation of work elsewhere with leave of absence. After they realised that this section refers to continuation of work elsewhere, and not leave of absence, they suggested that the text should combine the two sections.

The following sentence (3.3.7) challenged five participants (2x C2; 18–35, P2, C2; 36–40, P1, C3; 18–35, P2, C3; 36–40): “In exceptional cases, SU may grant employees leave to perform their duties elsewhere.” They asked what would constitute exceptional cases. I perceived this section to be duplicated in the presence at the workplace (3.3.9.b) section, which reads: “If employees have to perform their duties at some location other than their normal workplace, they must make adequate arrangements with their environmental head or dean (or his or her delegate) regarding their whereabouts.” Therefore, I omitted this section and thus removed unnecessary detail in order to conform to the requirements of plain language, since it merely confused participants and added to the density of the text. Instead, I incorporated it in “Leave of absence” (redesigned document, 1.7 (d)): “You may be allowed leave to perform your duties somewhere else after consultation with your environmental head or dean.” I combined this with leave of absence, as these themes are related, thereby using a plain language technique (Kimble, 1996–1997).

Besides, participants often overlooked continuation of work elsewhere as it is just one sentence (3.3.7). They rather searched for it in leave of absence. Its layout and structure was thus not successful, as it failed to attract readers’ attention. I therefore followed De Stadler et al.’s (2005) guidelines for effective document design and altered the original structure so it would be much more noticeable in the redesigned document.

#### **4.2.8 Unpaid leave**



Participants experienced many problems when they tried to understand unpaid leave. Ten participants (2x C1; 18–35, P1, C1; 36–40, P1, C1; 41–65, 2x C2; 18–35, 2x C3; 18–35, 2x C3; 36–40) acknowledged from the onset that the section is unclear and expressed the desire that the text should unpack and explain the topic more distinctly. In addition, I noticed that participants reread this section several times in order to understand it. Moreover, Participant 1, C1; 36–40 admitted that they had to read it twice in order to understand it, and from my observation, they still did not understand it, judging by their comments and questions.

Participant 1, C1; 41–65 shared that they get much support from the department with regards to these policies because they believe that the department realises this document is not as clear as it should be. As a result, I decided to enhance the comprehensibility of the text by writing it in plain language so that readers are able to understand the text. They should also be able to act effectively upon it without having to consult external sources. I thus clarified unpaid leave as I used simple terms, grouped similar themes together and set each scenario clearly apart. As I previously clarified the meaning of pensionable amount in a footnote, I started by explaining the conditions for unpaid leave. I furthermore described what exactly happens when you qualify for unpaid leave.

Seven participants (2x C1; 18–35, P1, C1; 36–40, 2x C2; 18–35, 2x C3; 18–35) mentioned that they do not understand 3.3.8.a and needed the text to be clearer. They wanted to know what the wording “in special cases” means, as well as how 25% of the pensionable amount is calculated. I thus removed “in special cases” and replaced it (redesigned document, 1.8 (a)): “You may be allowed unpaid leave only after your annual leave is exhausted.” I did this because the only time that SU will ever approve unpaid leave, is if your annual leave is depleted, which in fact refers to special cases, as unpaid leave is always a last resort. I also did it because 3.3.8.a appeared longwinded and ambiguous and participants lost the thread of the message along the way.

In addition, participants did not understand pensionable amount nor Cost of Employment (COE), let alone the 25% that they will receive. According to De Stadler (2005), a bureaucratic style of writing merely serves to isolate the reader from the text. Often, the result is that policy writers take a strategic decision to create documents with bureaucratic characteristics because they believe that if they employ specialised language they establish credibility and demonstrate a level of sophistication and expertise (Janssen & Neutelings, 2001). According to them, if they write in this manner, their documents will appear very important and significant. Therefore, I stated what the 25% is for. Additionally, I clarified “pensionable amount” as I outlined an example of the calculation in a clearly organised table, given that accurate text organisation is a determination of plain language according to Cornelius (2015).



Section 3.3.8.c particularly troubled and confused five participants (P1, C1; 36–40, P2, C2; 18–35, 2x C3 18–35, P2, C3; 36–40). Participant 1, C1; 36–40 as well as Participant 2, C2; 18–35 noted that the language use rendered that sentence incoherent and ambiguous. Participant 1, C3; 18–35 was not sure what is reduced: is it the annual leave or the pensionable amount? Additionally, Participant 1, C3; 36–40 asked what does the text mean with the word “accordingly”, whilst Participant 2, C3; 18–35 simply stated that they do not understand 3.3.8.c. I therefore decided to simplify that sentence and make it more understandable. I followed DuBay’s (2008) objective that plain language should produce texts that correspond to the readers’ level of understanding. I used more common language and reworked that section in the following manner (redesigned document, 1.8 b): “If you qualify for a research opportunity whilst you are on unpaid leave, the period of said research opportunity will be regarded as research leave.” The sentence is substantially shorter, but the core of the message is much clearer as I deleted all the additional detail that merely added to the length of the text.

I also replaced “a quarter of the relevant leave period” (3.3.8.d) with “25% of the time” because participants struggled firstly to calculate the relevant leave period and then what a quarter of that is. I added a bullet to clarify that SU requires you to work back 25% of the *time* that you were on unpaid leave. This is much clearer, direct and speaks to the readers’ frame of reference or background as is required by plain language.

I rewrote 3.3.8.b as I directly addressed the reader (redesigned document, 1.8 c): “You will not accumulate any annual leave when you are on unpaid leave.” Additionally, I rearranged its text organisation so that it appears at the very end, as it is the last thing readers would want to know regarding unpaid leave.

Moreover, I moved unpaid leave to the very end of the redesigned document. As I mentioned previously, employees can only consider unpaid leave after they have exhausted all other leave options. Therefore, it would be the last aspect any employee would look for in the policy document.

Participant 1, C1, 18–35 mentioned that they feel exposed regarding their limited knowledge of HR because the participant did not understand the language that Benefits Policy (DV 0406) used. The participant deemed it as HR language. Therefore, I used simpler words that are more common and that are not subject specific. Every SU employee should be able to understand it as language forms part of the organisational communication that is evident of the University.

#### **4.2.9 Presence at the workplace**

Three participants (P1, C1; 18–35, P1, C3; 18–35, P2, C3; 41–65) stated that they experienced no problems to understand presence at the workplace; however, they did not elaborate on exactly how they understood this section. From my observation, they did not particularly pay much attention to it and merely wanted to move on. Participant 1, C2; 36–40 made it clear that they understood this section clearly as they always communicates their whereabouts.

The remainder of the 13 participants expressed that the section confused them and they struggled to understand what the phrase *Presence at the workplace* means. They directly asked what this part of the text is trying to convey. Participants were unsure if this referred to your physical presence at work or working from home. In addition, they wondered if it means that SU does not allow employees to work from home. Participant 1, C1; 18–35 understood it to mean that you cannot work from home. Then the participant changed their mind and speculated that it perhaps means that employees should apply for leave of absence when they work from home.

Two participants (P1, C1; 36–40, P2, C1; 41–65) thought it refers to your physical presence at work, meaning that you always have to be present at the University. Eight participants (2x C2; 18–35, P2, C2; 36–40, 2x C2; 41–65, P2, C3; 18–35, P2, C3; 36–40; P1, C3; 41–65) considered that this refer to conditions of service.

Four participants (P1, C1; 36–40, P1, C2; 18–35, P2, C3; 18–35, P1, C3; 41–65) deemed this information to be repetitive and irrelevant. These participants also expressed their annoyance as they felt that they know when they are supposed to be where, as stipulated in their contracts.

Participants also stated that they were more confused after having read this section and that they are at a loss as to what the text expects from them. Janssen and Neutelings (2001) identify several strategies that policy writers apply in order to enable them to incorporate the positions of the diverse contributors into the writing process. This means that as policy writers reach consensus about the content, they are not mindful of the fact that readers will infer a different meaning from the text than what they initially intended, as demonstrated in the ambiguous wording and objections in 3.3.9 that allow readers to support their own interpretations of presence at the workplace.

Participant 2, C1; 41–65 indicated that 3.3.9.a directly contradicts 3.3.9.b as 3.3.9.a states that you have to always be at work, whilst 3.3.9.b states that you do not always have to be at work.

Additionally, this participant drew my attention to the fact that 3.3.9.b is inconsistent with another policy document regarding working hours that permits SU employees to work somewhere else, whereas 3.3.9.b implies that employees are allowed to work somewhere else subject to certain conditions. However, I decided not to address this issue, as this study did not

include any other policy documents besides Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3. I also reasoned that a future study could possibly look into how the different policy documents of SU correspond with one another.

Participant 1, C1; 41–65 noted that they consulted another policy document regarding leave in order to fully understand 3.3.9.a, and according to this participant, they knew how to proceed after reading that document. However, the participant was confused by Benefits Policy (DV0406 3.3.9) and would rather consult with their head of department in order to gain clarity. This participant or other readers of this policy document should not experience the need to acquire external sources in order to comprehend a particular document or text. The text should speak to the needs of the reader and enable them to, firstly, understand it clearly, and secondly, it should enable the reader to act unquestionably thereupon. Therefore, if the writer wrote 3.3.9.a in plain language, they would have produced text that corresponds to the readers' level of understanding. In turn, document design principles would ensure that successful communication is concerned with the extent to which SU employees understand the content.

Four participants (P1, C1; 36–40, P2, C2; 18–35, P2, C2; 36–40, P1, C2; 41–65) mentioned that “presence at the workplace” corresponds with “leave of absence” and two of them (P2, C2; 18–35, P2, C2; 36–40) thought that it also refers to “continuation of work elsewhere” (3.3.7). According to them, it is the opposite of leave and therefore it does not refer to leave but relates more to working hours.

In light of these viewpoints, it is thus clear that 3.3.9.a is merely a duplication of information. Power and dominance are more often than not organised and institutionalised (Van Dijk, 1993: 255), as perceived and repeated daily through organisational conversation.

Since I agreed with Participant 1, C2; 18–35 that this sentence refers to information that would be stated in your employment contract, I removed it as it is redundant information that is meaningless in this case. It is also in contrast to the objectives of plain language. Additionally, with the insight of CDA, I identified the sanctioned power that SU strategically uses in this text. The text unnecessarily communicates employees' working hours as participants pointed out that they know when they are supposed to be at work. It is thus redundant for the text to persuade staff members to act in the interest of the University in such a manner that it seems ordinary and conventional.

I incorporated 3.3.9.b into “Leave of absence” (redesigned document, 1.7 d): “You may be allowed leave to perform your duties somewhere else after consultation with your environmental head or dean.” In so doing, the sentence seems shorter, more direct and clearer.

I did that because the text organisation was clearly improper since the text did not neatly group the relevant information together. My aim was to send a coherent message with a clear theme in order to clarify the central meaning of the text, since it is essential for effective document design.

#### **4.2.10 Sick leave**

Two participants raised the issue of correspondence, and Participant 1, C2; 41–65 pointed out that 3.3.10.a does not align with another policy document on leave. The participant pointed out that the other document states that SU allows 30 days' sick leave to employees. In addition, Participant 2, C2; 18–35 expressed that 3.3.10.a does not align with Sun-e-HR, which indicates 120 days per every cycle of three years. However, as mentioned I did not address this issue of misalignment as my only focus during this study was Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3. I could merely attempt to clarify the content that already appears in the policy document. Therefore, I was not able to rewrite that content in order to align it with other policy documents or Sun-e-HR.

During my interviews with participants, I noticed that they were often taken aback when we reached the section on sick leave, because it was at the very end of the document, yet 13 of them said nothing. Some searched for it earlier on whilst others did not. However, only three out of the 17 participants made it known that they would have wanted it to appear earlier in the document. Participant 2, C2; 18–35 explicitly stated that sick leave should appear immediately after annual leave. In addition, Participant 1, C2; 41–65 stated: “*Finally* we get to sick leave.” The participant noted that it appears too late in the document and that it should come after annual leave. Participant 1, C3; 18–35 had the view that sick leave is most important; therefore, it should appear earlier in the document. On the other hand, Participant 1, C1; 36–40 noted that sick leave is not less important because it appears last in the document.

In order to understand 3.3.10, I drew on my insight of CDA to explore what the text says, how it is said and the underlying or implied message that the text does not state explicitly (but what certain groups have come to accept as the norm). They have no idea what the text tries to convey; however, they still act in a manner that the organisation prefers. According to Fairclough (2015), CDA examines the affiliation between communicative and non-communicative details that a collective share. Therefore, I concluded that the collective identity of SU employees could be the reason why 13 participants said nothing about the positioning of sick leave at the end of the document. Apparently, they accepted it as the normal practice of the University because no one else from their grouping has ever questioned it despite the fact that it does not sit well with them.

Nevertheless, I decided to rearrange the text organisation and moved sick leave directly after annual leave, because it is stated that way in the BCEA. This could also be a reason why participants expected sick leave to appear earlier. In addition, every employee gets sick from time to time and would apply for sick leave. However, not every employee would fall pregnant or enrol to study or do research. Therefore, I believed that employees consult the sick leave section more regularly than the other types of leave that appears before sick leave in Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3. I thus applied a principle of document design and I anticipated the questions of readers and structured the answers in clear, logical order. Hence, the redesigned document will read easier since readers will now get exactly what they expect as described by De Stadler et al. (2005).

Sixteen of the participants conveyed the problems, misunderstandings and confusion that they experienced with sick leave. One participant (P1, C1; 41–61) felt that everything regarding sick leave is clear-cut and poses absolutely no problems with regards to how they comprehend it, and we moved on to another section of the document.

Participant 1, C1; 41–65 and Participant 2, C1; 18–35 also initially expressed that everything regarding sick leave is fairly straight forward; however, the more we discussed that section, the more concerns they relayed. It thus became clear that they did in fact not understand everything in such a clear manner as they liked to believe. They would rather convince themselves that they understood the text, and in so doing, adhere to the status quo instead of disturbing the conventional concord that exists within their group. When individuals converse, listen, write or read, they act in a socially established manner and their actions usually result in common outcomes (Fairclough, 2015).

Ten participants (P1, C1; 36–40, P2, C1; 18–35, P1, C1; 41–65, P1, C2; 18–35, P2, C2; 36–40, P2, C2; 41–65, 2x C3; 18–35, 2x C3; 36–40) specifically highlighted that they found the clarity, language use and text organisation of the following sentence very problematic (3.3.10.a): “Employees who can submit a medical certificate that SU finds acceptable are entitled to a maximum of eight months’ sick leave (taken either continuously or as separate periods of eight months in total) during every successive period of three years of employment – at full pay for the first four months, thereafter at half the pensionable amount of the relevant employee's COE.” Participant 1, C2; 18–35 stated that they had to read that passage several times in order to understand it, after which they still had difficulty to come to grips with it.

Nine participants (P1, C1; 36–40, P1, C1; 41–65, 2x C2; 18–35, P2, C2; 36–40, P1, C2; 41–65, 2x C3; 18–35, P2, C3; 36–40) indicated their desire that the text should break up 3.3.10.a into

several sentences or even bullets. They deemed the section difficult to understand as it contained too much information that they were not able to process all at once.

The writer should never lose the focus of the text, and it seems like that is exactly what happened in 3.3.10. a. The sentence is too long and complex, therefore the readers could not figure out what its core message is supposed to be. As a result, participants could not understand the text. In addition, it does not contain plain language because it appears pretentious and longwinded. It also contains bureaucratic language and the content is not accurately organised, with too much unrelated information grouped together. These issues prevent the text from conforming to the Plain Language Commission's conventions, as outlined by Cornelius (2015).

Additionally, five participants (2x C2; 18–35, P1 ,C2; 41–65, P2, C3; 36–40, P2, C3; 41–65) said that they would prefer that the text speak about sick leave in terms of days instead of months, since they have no idea what eight months' sick leave means or how it works. Participant 1, C2; 41–65 specifically made the point that people do not take sick leave according to months. Employees usually take sick leave in days and it would only thereafter sometimes result in sick leave of months at a time. It would thus make sense for the text to clarify sick leave in terms of days.

Therefore, I rearranged the text organisation of 3.3.10.a and broke it up into several sections, each with its own theme. I restructured the organisation of this long, complicated sentence and I simply explained how many days and months' sick leave employees would qualify for in the redesigned document (1.2 a). Firstly, I explained it in terms of eight months every three years. Furthermore, I broke it down into the total number of days that SU permits employees per year. Moreover, I broke down the total number of days that SU permits employees for every three years of work in a bullet (redesigned document, 1.2 (a)).

I also reorganised the text organisation of 3.3.10.c and moved it to 1.2 (b) in the redesigned document. I decided to keep the example of sick leave that runs from a Friday until the following Monday, as the use of examples is a characteristic of plain language. It assists readers to understand the core message of the text.

Additionally, two participants (C1; 36–40, C2; 41–65) questioned the use of the phrase “can submit” (3.3.10.a), as it implies that you can choose whether you want to submit a medical certificate or not. Participant 1, C1; 36–40 stated that the phrase *have to submit* would be less ambiguous. Participants would thus like the text to clarify this, because as Participant 2, C3; 18–35 relayed, it is not clear when SU needs a certificate and when it does not. Therefore, I rewrote that phrase (3.3.10.a): “Employees who can submit (a) medical certificate(s) that SU finds acceptable...” in the following manner (redesigned document, 1.2 c): “SU requires that you

provide an accredited medical certificate for sick leave of more than two calendar days.” In so doing, I removed all doubt as to when SU requires a medical certificate. Readers can no longer derive that they can choose to submit a medical certificate, but it is clear that it is mandatory after employees have been absent for more than two consecutive days.

Furthermore, four participants (P1, C1; 18–35, P1, C1; 36–40, P2, C2; 18–35, P1, C3, 18–35) pointed out that the phrase “acceptable medical certificate” (3.3.10.a) confused them. They highlighted that they were unsure of what would constitute an acceptable medical certificate. They sought clarity as to who would decide what comprises an acceptable medical certificate and they were concerned that it is too open to interpretation. According to Codd (1988), this often occurs in policy documents, as policy writers use language in such a manner to create a particular meaning. In other words, they could well have chosen the word “acceptable” in order to attain their own biased goal. It could have been SU’s intention that employees should interpret the text in different ways, as group members usually ascribe to similar interpretations regarding their surroundings. This then becomes a central part of an individual’s social identity (Meyer, 2001). Thus, employees may become used to someone else deciding if their medical certificate is acceptable or not. They even come to expect it.

However, when I rewrote it in plain language in the redesigned document (1.2 c), I left no room for anyone to interpret what constitutes an acceptable medical certificate. I omitted the word “acceptable” and replaced it with “accredited”. It is thus clear what kind of certificate SU requires.

The themes that I state in 1.2 a, 1.2 b as well as in 1.2 c (redesigned document) logically follow on one another. During the interviews with participants, I became aware of the fact that, firstly, employees want clarity on how many days of sick leave SU permits. Then, when they are satisfied with that information, they move on to the next logical question of when SU needs a medical certificate. This notion aided me when I organised the text as such.

Hence, I clarified the section (3.3.10.a) “sick leave taken either continuously or as separate periods of eight months in total” when I separated sick leave of a few days from sick leave for longer periods. I did this because the information was not relevant and complete as a result of the incoherent text organisation.

I continued to outline what will happen when you take sick leave for longer periods (redesigned document, 1.2 (d)). In order to describe employees’ payment during sick leave for periods of longer than four months, I systematically stated the occurrence during the first four months. Then I proceeded to explain what would happen from the fifth to the eighth months.



Furthermore, I added an explanation of pensionable amount in a footnote, wrote “cost of employment” out in full and explained COE in a footnote. I did this because three participants (P1, C1; 18–35, P2, C2; 36–40, P2, C3; 36–40) expressed their desire that the text should explain pensionable amount much clearer than is the case in 3.3.10.a. In addition, two participants (2x C2; 36–40) indicated that they would be happy if the text could also clarify COE, as they do not understand what the term means.

Therefore, I used an example in a clearly organised table. I included this example because I kept in mind that Participant 1, C1; 18–35 stated that they immediately understood 3.3.10.(c) because Benefits Policy (DV0406 3.3.) offers an example regarding the calculation of sick leave from a Friday to a Monday. According to Kimble (1996–1997), plain language writers should use examples, tables and charts. Therefore, I deduced that readers would understand the information much better when they can engage with an illustration.

Moreover, Participant 1, C2; 36–40 stated that they have an idea of what this process entails because their partner has been through it. However, if the participant was not somewhat familiar with this process, they would not have understood the text. Therefore, this participant feels that the text should enhance the clarity of this passage much more. Consequently, I added this table as an example in order to explain 1.2 (d) in more detail (redesigned document).

In addition, I added a bullet to emphasise the point that SU requires an accredited medical certificate in such cases.

I amended 3.3.10.b by using the active voice and I directly addressed the reader (redesigned document, 1.2 e), as, in so doing, it reduces the distance between the text and the reader.

I omitted “that states the nature of the illness clearly” in section in 3.3.10.d as Participant 2, C2; 36–40 rightly expressed the opinion that it is outdated and does not comply with the Protection of Personal Information Act of South Africa (POPI Act, also known as POPIA). This act regulates the protection of South Africans’ personal information. It was passed in 2013, but to date, it has not yet come into full force (Protection of Personal Information Act, 2013)

According to Codd (1988), this occurrence is evident of policy documents given that it often functions as ideological texts that have been produced within a particular historical and political context. In other words, policy documents are created during a certain time in certain circumstances. It is thus evident that SU has not reviewed 3.3.10.d in light of recent developments. Therefore, I thought it best to rather remove that section, not only to comply with the law, but to also appear progressive.



Whilst I rearranged the text organisation of sick leave, I replaced the jargon or bureaucratic language with plain and user-friendly language. Additionally, I altered the grammar so that its readers can understand the text better and engage with it more easily. With this process, I also improved the readability and user friendliness of the text. I did not overload the reader with too much information since document design as well as plain language principles propose that the onus should never be on the reader to try and figure out the meaning of a text.

### 4.3 Summary

Before I started the redesign process of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3, I thought about what the goal of the redesigned document is. I derived from the interviews that the goal of the document should be to inform and/or to instruct readers or SU employees to act in a certain manner. However, in order to reach that goal, the text should persuade the reader.

Thus, in order to persuade the reader, the writer should always keep the readers in mind and address their needs, as mentioned previously (De Stadler et al., 2005).

Additionally, I made sure that I avoid the **seven sins of document design**, as described by Renkema (1999) and Hoeken, Renkema and Spooren (1999):

1. **Neglecting the real problem:** I did not lose sight of the readers' needs during the redesign process. Consequently, I structured the text in the redesigned document to speak to their needs and I addressed the readers directly.
2. **Neglecting to separate theory and problem-driven research:** During the individual interviews, I determined the needs of employees in order to improve Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3. SU could thus apply this feedback in order to determine the quality of that policy document.
3. **Disregarding the document's institutional context:** I made sure that I adhere to the communicative techniques of the University when I redesigned Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3. I omitted several terms that participants described as jargon and I replaced them with familiar words that are used within SU on a daily basis.
4. **Applying discourse concepts imprecisely:** Using CDA, I identified many instances where SU was seen as an authoritative party that tries to direct its members into its desired mode of action. However, after I addressed those instances, I changed that unfavourable image of SU for the better. If an organisation's image is improved after readers have read their documents, readers will perceive the quality of the document as being even better.

5. **Doing research in the lab to solve problems in the field:** After I redesigned Benefits Policy (DV 0406 3.3), I tested it by means of focus group discussions.
6. **Using material selectively:** I was very aware of the techniques that I used during the redesign process. I also made sure that the text manipulations seem natural in the redesigned document.
7. **Presenting results without consequences:** I gave an authentic account of the data that I found during the interviews. I then implemented those findings in the redesigned document. However, whether SU will be confident to follow suit remains to be seen.

Additionally, I directly communicated with readers as I used plain language to address them. I also did so to ensure that all readers can relate to the text, regardless of their educational level.

I restructured the redesigned document in order to answer readers' questions in a logical order. I thus accurately organised the context of the text and grouped related information together in an order that is familiar to readers.

In so doing, I ensured that readers could navigate the document more easily, as I added clear headings and subheadings. In addition, I changed the look and feel of the document as I changed the layout of the text. I also used white space between sections so that readers can easily derive where one section ends and where another one starts. Therefore, the document will not only look good but it will also be easier to read it.

Although I wrote the text in plain language, the style and grammar remain suitable to both its readers and the organisation (SU). I considered the institutional context of the University during the redesign process. I have done away with the pretentious, bureaucratic and longwinded language use and replaced it with everyday, common and familiar words that SU as well as its employees use on a daily basis.

In addition, I ensured that readers can perceive the redesigned document as progressive and up to date with present-day developments. One such an example is that I omitted *compassionate leave* and replaced it with *family responsibly leave*. The new section on *paternity leave* that speaks to the father or the partner also proves that SU has moved away from the outdated notion that the mother is the primary caregiver.

Lastly, I undertook to redesign the document according to a clear structure, and I reorganised it entirely according to the table that follows.

Table 4.2 Redesign process

Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3		Changes			Redesigned document: format	
3.3.1	Annual leave	Kept annual leave first in the document.	1.1	Annual leave	1.1	Annual leave
3.3.2	Maternity leave	Moved to the third section in the document. Renamed it <i>Parental leave</i> . Changed text organisation: <i>Maternity &amp; paternity leave</i> .	1.3	Parental leave	1.2	Sick leave
			1.3.1	Maternity leave	1.3	Parental leave
			1.3.2	Paternity leave	1.3.1	Maternity leave
3.3.3	Study opportunity	Moved to the fifth section in the document. Renamed to <i>Study leave</i> . Changed text organisation: <i>Study leave granted at intervals &amp; uninterrupted study leave</i> .	1.5	Study leave	1.3.2	Paternity leave
			1.5.1	Study leave granted at intervals	1.4	Family responsibility leave
			1.5.2	Uninterrupted study leave	1.5	Study leave
3.3.4	Research opportunity	Renamed to <i>Research leave</i> . Moved to the sixth section in the document.	1.6	Research leave	1.5.1	Study leave granted at Intervals
3.3.5	Compassionate leave	Renamed to <i>Family responsibility leave</i> . Moved to the fourth section in the document.	1.4	Family responsibility leave	1.5.2	Uninterrupted study leave

3.3.6	Leave of absence	Combined <i>Leave of absence</i> and <i>Continuation of work elsewhere</i> into one section.	1.7	Leave of absence	1.6	Research leave
3.3.7	Continuation of work elsewhere				1.7	Leave of absence
3.3.8	Unpaid leave	Kept the heading <i>Unpaid leave</i> . Moved it to the very last section of the document.	1.8	Unpaid leave	1.8	Unpaid leave
3.3.9	Presence at the workplace	Combined <i>Presence at the workplace</i> with <i>Continuation of work elsewhere</i> and <i>Leave of absence</i> .	1.7	Leave of absence		
3.3.10	Sick leave	Moved <i>Sick leave</i> to the second section in the document.	1.2	Sick leave		

## **5 CHAPTER 5: THE TEST PHASE**

### **5.1 Introduction**

After I redesigned Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3, the focus group discussions<sup>5</sup> served to test the outcome of this redesigned document. I did this to determine how employees would feel about and interact with this document. Their feedback would thus determine the success or failure of the application of plain language and document design principles to the redesigned document.

According to Parker and Tritter (2006), focus groups can produce considerable amounts of qualitative data, especially in the case of policy-related research. As this study revolves around Benefits Policy DV 0406 3.3, I believed that focus groups would be the most appropriate method for acquiring the perspectives of participants regarding the redesigned document.

Therefore, in order to ensure that focus group participants share their opinions freely, I did not recruit participants randomly. I rather conducted focus groups with people who would view themselves as similar to others in the group. Consequently, I recruited research participants according to their staff classification and I ensured that those staff classifications included all the age groups. These are different people to those that participated in the interviews.

### **5.2 Test phase methodology**

#### **5.2.1 Nonprobability sampling**

I used a nonprobability sampling method to recruit focus group participants. This process does not guarantee that the entire target population is afforded an equal chance to participate in the study (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016). However, I ensured that I included permanent SU employees that comprise C1, C2 and C3 employees who represent all the age groups of the target population (SU employees).

#### **5.2.2 Convenience sampling**

Convenience sampling seeks out members of the target population who meet certain practical criteria. It is usually easy to access participants, since they are physically close to the researcher and since they make themselves available and are willing to participate (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016).

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<sup>5</sup> Please refer to Annexure E: Focus group data analysis (Excel spreadsheet)

However, this sampling method has been criticised. According to Etikan, Musa and Alkassim (2016), convenience sampling is probably biased. They believe that the individuals selected by the researcher may not be relevant to the research problem. Hence, there is a risk that the researcher will collect poor quality data which would lead to poor research outcomes.

On the other hand, Skowronek and Duerr (2009) believe that the researcher can reduce bias and strengthen the usefulness of the study if the researcher ensures the representativeness of the sample. In addition, the researcher should try to obtain a sample that is a small version of the population (Skowronek & Duerr 2009). Therefore, I recruited participants who represent all the age groups and staff classifications of SU employees.

Additionally, I was convinced that using three separate focus groups was the best practice as C2 and C3 employees made it clear during the recruitment process that they are scared to air their views in front of fellow employees who belong to a different staff classification. Parker and Tritter (2006) believe that a synergy should exist between participants in order for them to meaningfully contribute to the discussion. In addition, Morgan (1997) states that if uniformity is present amongst participants, the discussion will be free-flowing and the researcher's ability to analyse the different perspectives of the groups will be enhanced.

According to Koerber and McMichael (2008), the researcher has to put in some amount of effort to recruit participants despite the fact that convenience is regarded as the foundation of convenience sampling. I experienced this to be true as I struggled to get participants together at the same time and place.

### **5.2.3 Design of the focus groups**

With each focus group, I tried to obtain a sample that represented the above-mentioned sections of SU employees aged 18 to 65. According to Morgan (1997), it is important that the participants in each group should feel comfortable enough to share their views about the topic to each other and not the researcher. Additionally, they should share the same social background.

This serves as motivation for my decision to arrange the focus groups in this manner, as I believed that if participants would have viewed themselves different to the other in the group, it would have hindered their willingness to freely share their opinions.

The groups were relatively small, with the aim of having at least six participants in each group. However, this did not quite materialise as one C1 participant cancelled at the last minute and one more failed to attend. Another C2 participant was absent due to illness, and as the C3's were very reluctant to participate, only four people attended. However, the groups still represented members

of the mentioned employees at SU as I ensured that each focus group represented a sample of the population, as suggested by Skowronek and Duerr (2009).

Each focus group comprised the following:

Table 5.1 Focus group participants

Staff classification	Age	Participants
Academic staff (C1) focus group	18–35	2
	36–40	1
	41–65	1
		4
Admin/support staff (C2) focus group	18–35	2
	36–40	1
	41–65	2
		5
Technical staff (C3) focus group	18–35	1
	36–40	1
	41–65	2
		4
Total		13

I asked participants in each focus group to complete the questionnaire (Annexure C) in order to confirm their demographic information. I then distributed the redesigned document and the discussion occurred thereafter. I did not give participants time to read the document as a whole; we rather discussed the different sections based on what caught their attention at any given time.

### 5.3 Focus group discussions

It was very difficult for each group to understand that the discussion should not be about the content of the document, but rather about how they understood, related to and felt about the organisation of the content, and the language that I used to clarify the content.

In many instances, the discussions touched on the content of the document, and I accepted this so as to not hinder the conversation flow. When participants did not understand something or when something was not clear enough, they would often ask me and/or other group members questions regarding the issue. I could thus clearly recognise when they understood something as they would

often mention it or they would simply move on without touching on it. Therefore, I often had to deduce the required information in between discussions about the content.

I am now going to relate the most important themes that emerged from each focus group discussion according to the arrangement of the different sections in the redesigned document.

Additionally, I will convey if and how I amended the redesigned document according to their inputs (amendments were only done if the inputs/suggested changes aligned with the objectives of plain language as well as with the principles of document design). In the event that I did not amend anything, I set out my reasons for not doing so.

However, the amendments that I describe here are not the final amendments to the redesigned document. After I incorporated the feedback of the focus groups into the redesigned document, I yet again applied plain language techniques iteratively as the success of plain language writing is a process of testing and continuous application (Burger, 2018). These changes can be seen in the second version of the redesigned document.

### **5.3.1 Annual leave**

The C1 and C3 focus groups immediately noticed the table that sets out an employee's leave entitlement according to post level. They mentioned that they liked the table as it immediately caught their attention. The C3 focus group never mentioned the narrative part as they only focused on the table. I derived that they did not need to read the narrative since the table addressed their needs.

The C2 focus group did not specifically mention the table, but they relayed that everything in annual leave was well ordered and that they saw no reason for misunderstanding anything. Furthermore, the C1 and C2 groups noted that the example further clarified anything that seemed unclear in the narrative.

Jansen and Meas (1999) believe that the intention of document design is to help the average reader to grasp the general idea that the text attempts to convey. I thus believe that the text achieved this goal, as these groups could find and understand the information they needed because it addressed their own unique needs. Furthermore, Kimble (1996–997) highlights that one of the guidelines of plain language is to use tables and examples in order to enhance the clarity of a text. It was consequently clear to me that the table and the example aided the readers to clearly understand the message of the text.

However, the C2 group were divided about the fact that the text directly addressed them. Some participants noted that they were not used to a policy document that addresses them so informally,



whilst others felt that the language use made them feel comfortable and not intimidated. Therefore, I did not alter the form of address, as one objective of plain language is to address the reader directly. Additionally, I conveyed the information clearly, as I used simple and direct language as recommended by Kimble's guidelines for plain language (1996–1997). Therefore, readers expressed that they felt comfortable and satisfied, because I clearly communicated the message as I directly addressed their needs.

### **5.3.2 Sick leave**

The C1 focus group never touched on sick leave, and we never discussed it. I therefore concluded that they had no problems with it and found everything to be in order. From my experience during these discussions, participants would ask questions or mention something when they noticed anything that bothered them. Therefore, I gathered that they could understand the section on sick leave and did not find anything they thought worth mentioning.

The C2 and C3 groups both mentioned that they found 1.2 (b) to be very clear as the example further enhanced their understanding of how many days sick leave from a Friday to a Monday would constitute. They found this section clear and understandable, because I adhered to Kimble's guidelines for plain language by aiding them with an example that clarified the text.

However, the C3 group was not sure if 1.2 (c): "SU requires that you provide an accredited medical certificate for sick leave of more than two (2) calendar days" means that you should bring a sick note after the second or the third day. The C2 group, however, did not mention any confusion regarding this aspect. Regardless, I decided to rewrite this section as 1.2 (c): "SU does not require you to provide a medical certificate for sick leave of two (2) or less calendar days. You should provide an accredited medical certificate for sick leave of more than two (2) calendar days." I did this because De Stadler et al. (2005) highlight that one of the principles of document design is that the writer should anticipate the needs of the readers so that readers can easily read and understand the text. Employees from all educational backgrounds can thus now understand the text (1.2 (c)) after only reading it once.

The C2 group further relayed that the footnote and example (1.2 (d)) helped them to understand the process of sick leave for longer periods. The example offered further context in order for them to at least understand the core message of the text. Furthermore, both groups mentioned that the footnote provided them with an explanation before they could actually search for it. As a result, I followed an objective of plain language as I offered examples and tables. Additionally, I applied a document design principle as I aided the reader to understand the core message of what the text is trying to convey.

Wright (1998) argues that document designers should solve problems by finding practical compromises. These compromises could include that, in addition to keeping the needs of the reader in mind, the document designer should also take heed not to stray from the accepted and established communicative methods of the organisation. Hence, focus groups could understand the text and felt comfortable with the language use as I employed language that is commonly used. For example, I removed the reference to an acceptable medical certificate and rather referred to an accredited medical certificate in the redesigned document.

The C3 group highlighted their concern about the possibility that your pension would not be enough to cover your benefits when you are sick for long periods. I could not alter the text as this refers to content that is also not present in the original Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3. Additionally, the C2 group remarked that there is a marked contrast between 1.2 (e) and the operation of sick leave, as employees do in fact accumulate sick leave every three years of employment. I could also not amend this section as Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 does not mention it.

### **5.3.3 Parental leave**

All three groups immediately remarked on the heading of this section. The C1 group liked it and felt that SU appears progressive by recognising both parents as caregivers. The C2 and C3 groups felt that the language use makes it clear that SU includes men/fathers. According to Fairclough (2015), CDA examines development and understanding and also the relationship between content development and shared circumstances. Therefore, one should take the direct setting of people as well as their viewpoints into account. I therefore decided to use language in such a manner that readers perceive SU in a positive light as society's viewpoints have changed significantly to now regard both parents as caregivers and not just the mother.

The C1 and C3 groups relayed their understanding that SU will only pay you for three pregnancies. The C2 group was divided on the meaning of this section, as some reflected on their own experience of how many paid pregnancies SU permits. Half of this group noted that the example after 1.3.1 (a) serves to further clarify any uncertainties. The C1 and C3 groups agreed with this sentiment. The example thus aided them to clarify anything that they did not understand. It is thus evident that when I followed Kimble's (1996–1997) plain language guidelines, the comprehensibility of the text is improved.

However, some participants in the C2 focus group were confused about the three months in 1.3 (a) and the four months in the example, because they focused more on their past personal experiences than on the text. Therefore, they were convinced that SU pays four months leave for each

pregnancy. However, when asked, these participants said that they have only had two pregnancies thus far.

On the other hand, the C1 focus group relayed their understanding that you can have as many pregnancies or babies as you wish, but that SU will only pay your full salary for nine months and that you can claim UIF if your allocated nine months' maternity leave is depleted. The C3 group understood that you should plan your maternity leave according to your own requirements whilst you should be mindful that SU will only pay you for three pregnancies.

It is thus clear to me that these focus groups clearly understood how many paid pregnancies SU allows. As I mentioned before, it was difficult for participants to focus on the language and design principles instead of its content and their past experiences with the content. I believe that this was the reason why half of the C2 group could not understand how many months SU allows for paid pregnancies. Hence, I did not see the need for further clarification of the number of paid pregnancies that SU permits in the redesigned document.

Moreover, I believe that the groups understood the core message of the text because I kept De Stadler's (2005:12) case study, *Performance Improvement Program* (Annexure A), of what document designers should *not* do, in mind. The writers of the *Performance Improvement Program* did not clearly define the goals of their document, despite the fact that the document included several goals. This resulted in the text not achieving those goals. Therefore, I clearly defined the goals of the text. One of these goals was to inform employees of exactly how maternity leave works, i.e. for how many months SU will pay them. Another goal was to instruct them how to plan their maternity leave and to make them aware of available options like claiming UIF for the period that they might not earn a salary. They could thus easily deduce the core message of this section.

All three groups noted that they understood that the same conditions of maternity leave would apply if they adopted a child who was younger than six months. I arranged this bullet regarding adoption last, after all the above-mentioned information. I thus ensured that the text follows a clear structure and layout, as recommended by De Stadler et al.'s (2005) guidelines for effective document design. In so doing, I also anticipated readers' questions whilst I grouped connected ideas together, as recommended by Kimble's (1996–1997) plain language guidelines. Accordingly, the text organisation made it easier for readers to make the connection and realise that the same conditions apply in the case of adoption.

The C2 focus group mentioned that they felt that SU restricts them by only allowing them to go on maternity leave one month before their due date (1.3.1 (b)): "SU may ask that you start your maternity leave only one (1) month before your expected delivery date". They wanted to know why they could not go on maternity leave later than one month before delivery. I decided to rewrite this

sentence removed the word *only* only bolded the word “ask” because SU does not force women to go on maternity leave one month before delivery date but that it is only a request from their side. (1.3.1 (b)): “SU may **ask** that you start your maternity leave one (1) month before your expected delivery date”.

This group also drew my attention to 1.3.1 (f) that states you do not earn annual leave whilst on maternity leave; in fact, they noted that you do indeed accumulate annual leave whilst on maternity leave. I checked this fact afterwards and then removed it from the second draft of the redesigned document when I realised that they were right.

The C1 group mentioned that the language use is very insensitive in 1.3.1 (d): “If you suffer a miscarriage during the last three (3) months of pregnancy, or if you give birth to a stillborn baby, the BCEA states that you are entitled to maternity leave of six (6) weeks thereafter”. They felt that SU demonstrates no empathy and that the language use makes them feel like the University only permits you that leave because they are obliged to do so. Through the lens of CDA, this section might well be read in that manner, because, according to Fairclough (2015), CDA is used to explore that which is said, the manner in which it is said and also the underlying or implied theme that the text does not explicitly state. Therefore, I changed that sentence to remove the reference to the BCEA (1.3.1 (d)): “If you suffer a miscarriage during the last three (3) months of pregnancy, or if you give birth to a stillborn baby, you are entitled to maternity leave of six (6) weeks thereafter”. When I removed that reference to the BCEA, the language use made SU appear sensitive and caring about their employees.

All three groups noticed the wording of the heading (paternity leave), and they all noted that it is focused on men/fathers/partners. However, they all searched for new ten days paternity leave that was broadcasted in the media stating that employees are entitled to ten days’ paternity leave for the birth of a child. When they could not find it, they were taken aback and noted that the text is outdated. I could not add this into the redesigned document as it is not included in Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3. Therefore, I could also not include it in (the second draft of) the redesigned document, as, at the time of writing this research report, the implementation of that law was still unclear at SU. However, I recommend that SU should soon obtain clarity and include it in all leave policy documents in order to avoid any uncertainty in the future.

All three groups relayed the trouble they experienced with the word *spouse*. The C3 and the C1 groups noted that they interpret that word to mean *married*. The C2 group questioned what it means and how SU interprets it. Unfortunately, I do not know for sure how SU interprets that word and I could not provide them with any clarity. The groups had trouble with 1.3.2 (b): “If you and your spouse are both SU employees and she has given birth”. They questioned whether you would

qualify for the benefits in the bullets below that section if you are not married. The C1 group not only had trouble with the word *spouse*, but they also felt dismayed by the use of the pronoun *she* in that sentence. They noted that 1.3.2 is not progressive and mindful of the many different scenarios like same sex couples and surrogacy. They asked what would happen if nobody gave birth, but someone needs to care for a new-born baby: would you still qualify for this leave? However, I could not change the content to include the many different scenarios that exists today as it is not included in Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3. I rather suggested that SU revises this phrase and include all these different situations in its leave policy in order not to appear archaic.

Additionally, as I am not sure of how SU interprets the word *spouse*, I decided it would be safer not to change it. The Oxford English Dictionary (2019) describes spouse as follows: “A husband or wife, or (in later use) a person joined to another in a comparable legally recognized union, considered in relation to his or her partner. Used mainly with possessives or followed by of (or, in earlier use, to). Also: (in the context of a wedding or imminent marriage) a bride or groom. The term was used exclusively with reference to marriage (latterly sometimes including common-law marriage) until the later 20th century, when other forms of union or partnership (including same sex partnership and same sex marriage) began to be widely discussed. After the non-specific use of the term (see sense 1a(c)) became established, uses of the term to refer to a partner of one specific gender became increasingly likely to be understood in the non-specific sense.” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2019). According to Fairclough (2015), people’s social conditions determine how they communicate. The connotations to and associations with particular language differ from organisation to organisation as each organisation derive their own meaning from their respective communicative techniques. If I were to replace the word *spouse* with another word, a different, unintended meaning might be conveyed. Therefore, I recommend that HR clarify the meaning of *spouse* in consultation with SU’s legal department in order to define its meaning without any uncertainty.

#### **5.3.4 Family responsibility leave**

The C2 and C3 groups remarked that the *Family responsibility leave* heading caught their attention from the start. They felt that this language use makes SU seem progressive and that the broader term includes more instances than just death. Through CDA, I discovered that people ascribe meanings to texts according to certain communicative standards that they identify with. Additionally, they use language according to the norms of society. I thus believe that the groups identified with this term because it has recently become more common and recognised in society. This notion relates to Fairclough’s (2015) standpoint that CDA identifies that the social conditions of people determine how they communicate or strive to communicate. The style and grammar is

thus fitting to the readers, as outlined by the Plain Language Commission of 2011 (Cornelius, 2015), and therefore the language use spoke to their identity.

Next, all three groups noted that they immediately noticed the table. They could easily understand it and they could thus derive the information that they needed. However, all the groups were confused by the abbreviation of BCEA. They did not know what it means and they relayed that they do not want to wonder or page back in the document to search for it. The C1 group commented that it makes them feel inadequate when they do not know what the text means. According to Cornelius (2015), plain language should provide information that is relevant and complete; therefore, I decided to write Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA) in full in the Table in 1.4.

The C1 group found that the information in the text is neatly organised. However, the other two groups were confused about how many days SU permits for family responsibility leave. Both groups said that they understood the total number of days but that it was not clear if they could only take three days or could take 4.7 days per year. The text was thus not clear enough to address their needs.

Furthermore, the C2 group was divided on whether a breakdown between what SU permits and what the BCEA permits is necessary. Some mentioned that they do not need to know the breakdown; all they were interested in is how many days they are allowed. Others felt that they liked the fact that the text mentions the law. Additionally, the C3 group noted that they also liked the mentioning of the law and that it makes SU seem transparent and law abiding. The C1 group echoed these sentiments as they also noted that the language use of the additional days that SU grants makes the University seem generous and caring. Language is an agent of changing social relationships, a form of social practice as well as a social process in itself (Fairclough, 2015). These groups thus perceived SU in a positive light because, through the lens of CDA, I identified and removed instances where SU can be seen as the authoritative group directing the less powerful. I thus used language in such a manner that readers are more positive towards the University after they have read that section.

Furthermore, I enhanced the clarity of that section as I created a new heading: “Days granted by SU”. Additionally, in the previous total section I wrote: “Total days granted by SU”. I kept the breakdown of SU and the BCEA and I believe that it should now be clear to readers that SU allows the three days as per the BCEA plus the additional 4.7 days, which means that SU allows a total of 7.7 days per year.

The C1 group did not mention anything further about family responsibility leave and I reasoned that they were satisfied that the text addressed their needs and answered any questions they had as they never expressed any. Besides the fact that the C3 group again expressed their confusion regarding



the word *spouse* in 1.4 (a, bullet 2), the remaining groups had no difficulty to understand the bullets. It was therefore clear to them when they would qualify for family responsibility leave because the bullets renders the text easy to read. De Stadler (2005) recommends that document designers should pay attention to the structure and layout of the text, which is what I did.

### 5.3.5 Study leave

The C2 and C3 groups clearly understood study leave granted at intervals. They noted and repeated certain points that suggested how they understood that section and it agreed with the objective of the text. They could thus clearly derive the information that the text tries to convey because I conveyed the message with the objective of the text in mind, as De Stadler et al. (2005) recommends.

The only thing that the C2 group mentioned was that the text should emphasise that study leave granted at intervals is only focused on employees who study at SU. They derived this viewpoint from 1.5.1 (c, bullet 4): “the time that you travel to attend classes outside of Stellenbosch will be taken from your annual leave.” However, I did not amend this in the redesigned document as I reasoned that Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3.a, bullet 4 (1), does not mention that employees only qualify if they study at SU. In order to avoid any confusion, I recommend that HR should clarify this aspect in the policy document.

From my viewpoint, the text is focused only on the *time* that employees have to travel to classes outside of Stellenbosch: “The full travelling time that employees spend to attend classes outside of Stellenbosch will be debited against their annual leave.” However, I did change that sentence to the active voice in the second draft of the redesigned document (1.5.1 (c, bullet 4)): “SU will take the time that you travel to attend classes outside of Stellenbosch from your annual leave”. According to Kimble (1996–1997), one of the plain language guidelines is to write in the active voice, as readers will find the text easier to read.

The C1 group highlighted 1.5.1 (b, bullet 1). They wanted more clarity and context regarding who would decide on acceptable progress. They were not happy with the language use and they needed the text to clearly define the word *acceptable*. However, I did not amend this section, nor did I replace *acceptable* with a different word in the second draft of the redesigned document, as 1.5.1 (b) clearly states: “When you are granted a study opportunity, you and your head of division will determine the conditions of your progress”. However, I noticed that the above sentence is written in the passive voice and I decided to change it to the active voice in the redesigned document (1.5.1(b)): “When SU grants you a study opportunity, **you and your head of division will determine the conditions of your progress.**” Additionally, I used bold font (redesigned document,

second draft) to draw attention to the fact that you and your head of division will determine the conditions of your progress in order to clarify who decides on what is acceptable progress. According to Cornelius (2015), the Plain Language Commission (2011) in the UK suggests that one of the questions one should ask is if the text uses visual aids appropriately. The answer to this question was “no”, because I realised that the C1 group did not notice 1.5.1 (b) therefore, I decided to visually aid the reader by using bold font.

When it came to uninterrupted study leave, the C2 group noted that they are not going to read that section as it is not relevant to them. They only read the first sentence in 1.5.2: “This benefit pertains to you if SU requires that you obtain a particular qualification such as a doctorate” and noted that the text is not focused on them, as SU does not require that they should obtain any kind of qualification. The C3 group reacted in the same way; however, they never said anything about that section but merely paged past it. As a result, I realised that in this instance, the text achieved its desired goal (as outlined by the document design principles of De Stadler et al. (2005)) because it kept the needs of the reader in mind. Additionally, the text spoke directly to the profile or identity of the intended reader, with the result that readers who were not the target readership of the text could easily see that the information was not intended for them.

In contrast to the above-mentioned groups, the C1 group read that section (1.5.2 uninterrupted study leave) very attentively as they also noticed the first sentence: “This benefit pertains to you if SU requires that you obtain a particular qualification such as a doctorate”. They immediately recognised that the text is focused on them as it spoke directly to their identity as academics. I gathered that this is because I used appropriate visual aids (bold font) to draw the attention of the reader. Because I gave attention to the layout and non-verbal elements (as recommended by De Stadler et al. (2005)), the readers found the look and feel of the text acceptable. However, they noted that the second sentence (“You may be granted a once-off study opportunity of one (1) year if you fulfil the following requirements”) made them feel intimidated. They related that the text does not mention any recourse of what will happen if you do not obtain the qualification after SU granted you the study opportunity of one year. Therefore, they felt scared to make use of such an opportunity as the consequences of not succeeding is unknown.

They compared this occurrence with 1.5.1 (b, bullet 2) that states that you will not qualify for annual leave if your progress is not acceptable. They also highlighted 1.5.2 (d) that states if your opportunity takes longer than a year, you will qualify for annual leave. They felt that these sections at least clarify the consequences of what will happen if you do not achieve what you were supposed to achieve. However, I could not provide them with any recourse in the second draft of the



redesigned document, as Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3.3.b does not mention any recourse. Therefore, I could not add context or clarity as it relates to content.

This group also drew attention to 1.5.2 (b): “You must perform your duties well”. They mentioned their apprehension, their desire for clarity of meaning and their uncertainty of who would decide on how the adverb well would be defined. Unfortunately, I could not address this issue in the second draft of the redesigned document, as I do not know what SU means with that sentence. Additionally, Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 does not provide any context in that regard, and I did not want to run the risk of altering anything that relates to content. I could also not get answers from the author of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 as they never responded to my requests for an interview.

### 5.3.6 Research leave

Both the C2 and C3 groups skipped this section without saying anything about it. As with the previous section, I again concluded that the text succeeded in its goal to speak directly to its intended audience. These groups could already determine from the heading what this section is about, and from there they made the choice not to read it as it does not address their needs. I clearly highlighted the target audience, and in doing so, I recalled how De Stadler’s (2005:12) case study, *Performance Improvement Program*, illustrates what document designers should **not** do. In this text, the writer did not keep the intended target audience in mind, and thus did not address the needs of the reader.

The C1 group, however, paid very close attention to this section. In fact, I find it worth mentioning that this was the first section they paged to during our discussion. They also mentioned that the introductory sentence in that section contradicts the requirements that need to be met to qualify for research leave. The text confuses them as it states (1.6): “If you are required to do research, you may be granted research leave of a maximum of thirty (30) working days after every one (1) year of uninterrupted service”. Then, in 1.6 (a–e), the text mentions conditions that you have to meet in order to qualify for the research leave. Firstly, I rewrote 1.6 (a) in the active voice: “If SU requires you to do research, you may receive research leave of a maximum of thirty (30) working days after every one (1) year of uninterrupted service.” According to Kimble’s (1996–1997) guidelines for plain language, readers will find a text easier to read and to understand if it is written in the active voice. Additionally, this group did not notice the following sentence that states: “You must fulfil the following requirements in order to qualify for this benefit”. If they indeed noticed this sentence, they would not have felt that the conditions are suddenly sprung on them out of nowhere. Therefore, I wrote the missed sentence in bold font in the second draft of the redesigned document in order for readers to notice it easily.

They also noted that it is not clear how you can structure the 250 days. I could not change anything in order to enhance the clarity, as I do not know the period for those days. Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3.4 a, bullet 1, only states: “a maximum of 250 working days may be granted.” Therefore, I was not able to provide any context and left it unchanged in the redesigned document (second draft).

This group also took issue with the first part in 1.6 (b): “Your performance as a researcher must have been acceptable”. The language use made them feel uneasy; they mentioned that the text should clearly define the word acceptable. Furthermore, they wanted to know who would decide on what is acceptable, and they mentioned that the sentence leaves too much room for departments to make up their own rules. I believed that if they noticed the second sentence in 1.6 (b), it would have cleared up all their confusion: “This is according to the requirements of your faculty and as approved by the Executive Committee of Senate.” This sentence provided enough clarity as to who would decide on what is acceptable. Furthermore, I reasoned that each faculty would have their own unique set of requirements that departments would have to fulfil. Additionally, this is an institutional policy document about leave and it cannot include the requirements of the different faculties. Therefore, I did not change anything other than writing the following in bold font (1.7 (a) redesigned document, second draft): “...**the requirements of your faculty**...approved by the Executive Committee of Senate.” According to De Stadler et al.’s (2005) guidelines for effective document design, it is important to take head of the non-verbal elements such as the layout of the content. Readers will pay more attention to text if they can notice it easily.

This group also communicated that the use of the modal verb *must* is too restrictive. However, they noted that the words at least later on in that section makes them feel a bit better (they realised that they are obliged to one month at a time). Additionally, they felt that the word must in 1.6 (d) is too ambiguous: “You *must* take research leave in segments of at least one (1) month. You must ensure that you do not interrupt the daily activities of your department or division when planning your research leave.” However, I interpreted that SU did indeed intend it to be binding (Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3.4.c): “Research opportunities must be taken in blocks of at least one month, with due consideration for SU’s best interests.” Therefore, I used “must” because it is simple and direct. Additionally, Kimble (1996–1997) states that plain language clarifies and improves the accuracy of text. I thus deduced that the word “must” achieved the goal of the text, which is to make employees understand that they are required to fulfil these conditions in order to qualify for research leave. Furthermore, I could gather that they do understand the message that the text wants to convey, as they mentioned that the words “at least” (1.6 (d): “You must take research leave in segments of at least one (1) month”) makes them feel a bit better. Therefore, I determined that the language use of the text effectively speaks to their needs.

Moreover, I did not change this in the redesigned document (second draft) as their concern related to the fact that they are obliged to one (1) month and they do not agree with that. It relates to content and I cannot change anything about that. I did, however, change the latter part of that section to the active voice, because plain language requires a text to be written in the active voice (1.6 (d)): “You must ensure that you do not interrupt the daily activities of your department or division when you plan your research leave.”

### **5.3.7 Leave of absence**

The C1 focus group reported that the period in 1.7 (a): “You may be granted leave of absence for a maximum of fifteen (15) working days every time that you attend gatherings such as conferences and meetings officially recognised by SU” was initially unclear to them. However, after they read the bullet below 1.7 (a) they understood that section better. The C2 group did not mention anything regarding that section, so I reasoned that they understood it. I believe the inclusion of the bullet aided the readers because its structure is well organised, therefore it is easy to understand as per the Plain Language Commission of 2011 (cited in Cornelius, 2015).

The C3 group, on the other hand, expressed their confusion, as they doubted whether they would still be paid if they qualify for leave of absence. Consequently, I explained that 1.7 (a) refers to when you go on a workshop, short course or teambuilding event and they immediately understood its meaning. Hence, I included teambuilding, workshops and short courses as examples into that section: “SU may grant you leave of absence for a maximum of fifteen working days every time that you attend officially recognised SU gatherings. This includes conferences, meetings, workshops, short courses, teambuilding, etc.” I did this because plain language principles recommend that people from all educational backgrounds should be able to understand a text after they read it for the first time. The text should therefore correspond to the readers’ level of understanding (DuBay, 2008). This group had the lowest levels of education, with matric/grade 12 being the highest.

All the groups understood 1.7 (b). The C2 and C3 groups did not mention it and C1 noted that they understood that they could get one day of paid leave every time that they move house. The message was thus clear and coherent and readers could easily understand its meaning.

Groups C1 and C3 noted that they understood 1.7 (c) to mean that they can qualify for one day if they need to be present in court. However, one C2 participant did not understand the meaning of the word “subpoenaed”; the rest of the group explained its meaning to this participant. It was thus clear to me that the groups understood that section because it was written in plain language that contained plain and simple terms that are easy to understand. However, I decided to remove the word

*subpoenaed* and replaced it with *summoned*: “If you are *summoned* to appear as a witness in court proceedings, SU allows the number of days that you need to be present in court.” I did this because I believed that the word *summon* is more commonly used and it would be much easier for readers to understand what it means. According to Kimble’s plain language guidelines, one should use simple, direct and familiar words when you write in plain language.

When it came to 1.7 (d), the C2 group asked if this refers to working from home. They were looking for that exact wording as they again referred to their own experiences of what happens in practice. However, the C1 and C3 groups understood its meaning without any problems. I know this because the C1 group noted that this means they can mark assignments from anywhere, including from home, and they do not need to be present at the University in order to do this. Additionally, the C3 group remarked that this is not focused on them, as they are not able to clean from anywhere else besides the University premises. Document design is concerned with the degree to which its readers understand the content of a text (Schrivver, 1997). The text thus enabled the C1 and C3 focus groups to act unmistakably thereupon because it spoke to their needs as readers and empowered them to firstly understand the content clearly and then to act accordingly.

The C1 group further expressed their dismay with the use of the word *consultation*, as they interpreted it to mean that you have to get permission from your environmental head or dean in order to work from somewhere else. I considered changing that word, but then I decided against it, as the core message of the text is that employees cannot just be absent from the University premises without the endorsement or knowledge of their head of department (HOD). Their verbalisation of their dislike for the word *consultation* convinced me that they did in fact accurately understand the message that the text tries to convey. I cannot change it just because they did not like the message. At any workplace, employees cannot come and go as they please; you have to communicate your whereabouts with your HOD. Additionally, I inferred that Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3.9. b conveys the same meaning: “If employees have to perform their duties at some location other than their normal workplace, they must make adequate arrangement with their environmental head or dean (or his or her delegate) regarding their whereabouts.” This further convinced me that this issue relates to content and that I should rather not change it.

Furthermore, one participant needed clarity on the meaning of *environmental head or dean*. I thus decided to add HOD in brackets in order to enhance the meaning of those terms: 1.7 (d): “SU may allow you leave to perform your duties somewhere else after you have consulted with your environmental head/head of department (HOD) or dean.”

### 5.3.8 Unpaid leave

The C2 group pointed out that the first sentence in 1.8 (a): “You may be allowed unpaid leave only after your annual leave is exhausted” is a contradiction of what happens in practice during the daily activities at SU. According to them, employees qualify for unpaid leave even if they have sufficient annual leave available. This convinced me that they clearly understood the meaning of the text. If they did not understand it, they would not have been able to point out the contradictions. Additionally, they never mentioned the example, which further convinced me that they did not need to look at the example in order to understand the narrative as I made sure that the information in the text is well organised as per the Plain Language Commission of 2011 (cited in Cornelius, 2015). Therefore, they could easily deduce the message that the text wants to convey.

The C3 group mentioned that they liked the language use as it is plain and simple to understand. They noted that this scenario of unpaid leave will be a last resort for them and they noted that SU will take your money to pay your benefits. I thus deduced that they understood the core message of the text. They also ignored the example and did not mention it once, leading me to believe that the narrative answered their questions. I concluded that they found the style and grammar fitting and could therefore easily grasp the essence of the message.

On the other hand, the C1 group noted that they struggled to understand the meaning of 1.8 (a) at first and they did not exactly understand COE, but said that the example helped them to make sense of 1.8 (a). They noted that they did not completely understand the example even though it helped them to understand what will be left (if anything) after SU paid your benefits. According to Kimble’s guidelines for plain language, the use of tables, graphics and examples will assist the reader to make sense of text. It is thus clear to me that they could understand the core message of the text with the help of the example. Additionally, I concluded that they could understand the core message as I sent a coherent message with a clear theme as recommended by De Stadler et al.’s (2005) guidelines for effective document design.

Consequently, I did not alter 1.8 (a) in the second draft of the redesigned document, as I was satisfied that the readers understood the core message of the text. I adhered to De Stadler et al.’s (2005) guidelines for effective document design and I made sure to send a coherent message with a clear theme. In focusing on the main idea throughout 1.8 (a), as well as in the example beneath that, I aided the reader to understand the most important concepts in that section.

The C2 and C3 groups mentioned that they noticed the bullet after the table as it stood out for them. They could thus easily notice that sentence because of its text organisation. However, the C2 group wanted to know what 25% is and why you should work it back. The C1 group only noted that you have to work back the 25% because SU paid your benefits when you did not work. They were satisfied that they understood that section. However, I do not know if they interpreted it correctly,

as Benefits Policy (DV0406 3.3.8.d) does not provide any background but merely states: “Staff who takes advantage of this benefit must remain in SU’s employ afterward for a quarter of the relevant leave period.”

The C3 group stated that the bullet is unclear – they did not understand when SU would require you to work 25%. Is it whilst you are away or when you come back? In order to enhance the clarity of that sentence, I changed it in the redesigned document (second draft) to read as follows: “When you return from unpaid leave, SU requires that you continue to work at the University for twenty-five percent of the time that you were on unpaid leave”. I hence believe that this would clarify that SU calculates the 25% according to the period that you were on unpaid leave.

## **5.4 Summary**

I conducted the focus groups in order to test the redesigned document. It was my aim to determine to what extent it adhered to plain language and document design principles. Furthermore, I wanted to gain the perspectives of employees who are supposed to use this document during their daily activities within their work environments.

Consequently, I gained an understanding of their viewpoints regarding this document, as many opinions and concerns emerged during these discussions as I have conveyed above. As a result, their feedback prompted me to amend the redesigned document in instances where groups identified that uncertainty and ambiguity still exist.

Groups commented on the overall look and feel of the document. They liked the plain and simple language use that is not as formal as is usually typical of policy documents. I made sure that I paid attention to document design issues like typeface and white space as recommended by Kimble’s (1996–1997) guidelines for plain language. This clean layout and typeface thus created the impression that the document is easy to read and therefore group members were not unwilling to engage with it.

Furthermore, I took into consideration De Stadler et al.’s (2005) guidelines for effective document design when I balanced the needs of the employees and that of the University. Consequently, I did not just take the needs of the readers into consideration, but also those of SU.

Organisations sanction power strategically in order to persuade inferior groups to act in the interest of the powerful (Van Dijk, 1993). For this reason, I did not just amend sections that bothered these focus groups but through the lens of CDA, I removed instances where employees can perceive that SU deliberately exerts its power so that employees would act in the interest of the University. Focus groups therefore perceived SU as progressive, generous and caring.

Many obstacles still exist with regards to the redesign of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 into plain language and according to document design principles. Focus groups pointed to several issues of contradictions that occur between what happens in practice and what is outlined in the redesigned document. This obstructed my efforts to eliminate all the vagueness in the document.

However, I concluded that the focus groups could more easily understand the information that the redesigned document tries to convey. I thus, deduced that the application of plain language and document design principles in Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 in fact aided readers to find it more accessible and understandable.



## 6 CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

### 6.1 Summary of findings

During the in-depth individual interviews, I derived that Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 failed in its goal to inform and/or instruct SU employees to act in a certain manner. Readers found the document complicated and difficult to understand because of the language use and ambiguity. They also felt that the formal language use intimidated them. Therefore, they were not sure of how to act after they have read the document. As the problem statement of this study was that **staff members of Stellenbosch University (SU) perceive Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 as difficult to use and understand**, I found it necessary to investigate and eliminate elements of ambiguity in order to effectively accomplish the goal of the document. In order to persuade the reader, the writer should always keep the readers in mind and address their needs (De Stadler et al., 2005). The writer should thus ensure that the readers know exactly how to act after they have read the document.

Consequently, I enhanced the communicative effectiveness, i.e. the comprehensibility and usability of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3, by rewriting it in plain language and according to document design principles ([hypo] thesis statement) in the redesigned document. Additionally, I improved SU's image through clear, concise communication in plain language that leaves no room for ambiguity. I addressed the readers directly whilst ensuring that the style and grammar remain suitable to both the readers and SU. Therefore, I considered the institutional context of the University during the redesign process and I ensured that all readers could relate to the text, regardless of their educational level.

Additionally, readers' understanding of the redesigned document was tested during the focus group discussions.

### 6.2 Individual interviews

The language use, text organisation and clarity of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 and SU employees' feelings and reactions to it was the focus of the in-depth individual interviews.

#### 6.2.1 Plain language and document design

During the in-depth individual discussions, participants noted that Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 is not comprehensible enough as it overflows with legalese and bureaucratese. They found this undesirable and realised that it could be more user-friendly and comprehensible, which in turn would make referencing to supplementary sources unnecessary.



One of the objectives of plain language is that individuals from different educational levels should be able to understand a text after reading it for the first time. They should not find it necessary to acquire external sources in order to comprehend a particular text.

However, this was not the case after participants read this document, therefore their needs as readers were not met in Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3. Moreover, I deduced that the author(s) of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 was/were more concerned with establishing the credibility of the University through the employment of specialised language (as it demonstrates a level of sophistication and expertise) than ensuring that readers find the text easy to read and understand.

### **6.2.2 Comprehensibility and readability of benefits policy DV0406 3.3**

During the in-depth individual interviews, I encouraged participants to share their experience(s) of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 within their everyday work environments, as well as the actions that have ensued as a result of those experiences. The objective of these interviews was to identify the problem area(s) within Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3.

The extent of its usability and the way in which readers understand it were thus established. It emerged that interview participants found Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 very difficult to understand and navigate through it. Participants were afraid and even unwilling to engage with it.

At first, participants found it difficult to focus on issues like the organisation and language use of the text instead of the content. However, it was easier to remind them to not focus on the content in the individual interviews than it was during the focus group discussions (because it was a one-on-one conversation).

The language use intimidated participants as they viewed it as formal and filled with legalese. Therefore, participants with low and intermediary educational levels deemed the text to be pitched at highly educated employees only. However, highly educated employees were just as confused and felt the text was not focused on them either. Consequently, participants from all educational levels did not understand the document, and they all felt anxious when reading it.

Additionally, the text organisation made it very difficult for them to find information relevant to them. The text thus did not speak to the individual needs of readers, and therefore they gave up and discontinued reading, seeking alternative avenues of assistance, like phoning HR and line managers.

Janssen and Maes (1999) are of the opinion that the intention of document design is to realise the desires of individuals as well as organisations; however, this did not seem to be the objective of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3. Additionally, the document does not seem to produce text that corresponds to the readers' level of understanding as is typical of plain language.

Therefore, I deduced that interview participants from different educational backgrounds did not understand the document.

### **6.3 The redesign process**

I applied the information that I obtained during the in-depth individual interviews and I redesigned Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 by rewriting it in plain language and according to document design principles.

My main objective was to ensure that employees from all educational levels could understand the document after they have read it only once. Therefore, it was very important that the language could be easily comprehended by readers as well ascribe to the communicative practices of the University. In other words, readers should not be able to detect authorship because the text displays the image of the University. My aim as document designer was therefore to meet the communicative needs of both readers/employees and SU.

Furthermore, through the use of CDA I removed instances where SU was perceived to direct employees to act in the interest of the University. I wanted to ensure that readers, after having read the text, were positive about the image and identity of SU and perceived them to be caring and serving the interests of the employees.

I systematically analysed interview participants' feedback and referred to this analysis whilst I rewrote the document. Since participants noted that they would like the document to be more explicit, clear and less complicated, I followed both plain language and document design guidelines in order to reach these objectives.

Consequently, I ensured that the redesigned document is easy to read and to understand. I removed instances of ambiguity, an impersonal and vague tone as well as the bureaucratic language and officialese.

Therefore, the redesigned document is an uncomplicated, transparent and reader-friendly version of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3, written in plain language and according to document design principles.

### **6.4 Test phase: redesigned document**

Focus group discussions with employees from all educational levels represented the test phase of the redesigned document. During this test phase, I obtained information regarding the said document, and the employees' responses indicated that the redesigned document was in fact an improvement on Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3.

The three focus groups relayed that participants found the document a much easier read. I ascribe this to the fact that I redesigned the text with the reader in mind. I acknowledged that document design should focus on the reader and their ability to act accordingly after reading the text for the first time.

Moreover, the focus groups' first impression of the document was very favourable, as they liked the look and feel as well as layout of the document. They were very eager to engage with the document and excitedly paged back and forth, each searching and finding the sections that they deemed as relevant to them.

They were satisfied that they could locate the relevant information easily, and the text answered their questions even before they could ask it. Therefore, I deduced that the text succeeded in anticipating their questions and addressed them.

The focus group participants did not feel intimidated by the text, and they found that the language use was plain and simple and that it corresponds with their level of understanding. As the educational levels of the participants in the focus groups ranged from very low to those having PhDs, I concluded that the text spoke to the educational levels of everyone.

The examples and tables that I used aided them to understand the core message of the text. It is thus clear that these elements, a characteristic of plain language, rendered the text much more understandable to employees from all educational levels. Consequently, readers/employees clearly understood the redesigned document and they could engage with it more easily and effectively because it was written in plain language and according to document design principles.

I can thus safely accept that the objective of this study has been met, because employees with varied educational levels could understand the core message of what the text is trying to convey without having to consult supplementary sources. The communicative effectiveness, i.e. the comprehensibility and usability of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3, was thus enhanced ([hypo] thesis statement) after I rewrote it in plain language and according to document design principles.

The redesigned document is transparent, with clearly defined goals; therefore, readers could grasp its content. The addition of explanations subsequently became redundant. However, during the focus groups, many problems regarding the comprehensibility of the content came to light. Therefore, I would recommend that HR clarify this in order to attain a truly unambiguous document.

## **6.5 Summary of contributions**

I could not find any previous studies that are directly related to policy documents written in plain language and according to document design principles. Therefore, I drew on plain language, document design, and CDA during this study. I thus employed these various fields in order to successfully enhance the ability of readers with average literacy levels to engage with and to understand Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 in the redesigned format.

The improved, understandable, user-friendly and transparent Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 in the redesigned format could be to HR's benefit. It could save time and resources that could be spent more effectively elsewhere.

## **6.6 Suggestions for further research**

The content of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 was never the focus of this study; however, it was near impossible to ignore it during the data collection process. This often led to much confusion and consternation. However, I could still deduce feedback from participants in between discussions of the content, even though it resulted in a very time-consuming exercise.

Additionally, because I could not interview the author(s) of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3, there were many instances where I also did not understand the content myself. This made the redesign process very difficult.

Future researchers should thus attempt to work in collaboration with HR to include the content of Benefits Policy DV0406 3.3 in future studies. This would enhance the feedback from research participants, as some of them struggled to ignore the content, which could have affected the results of this study.

Additionally, should future researchers collaborate with HR, it could legitimise the redesigned document, which in turn could be implemented by HR to their advantage. Furthermore, this study could set a precedent for contributions to the formation of a comprehensible, transparent and clear leave policy document at the University.

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